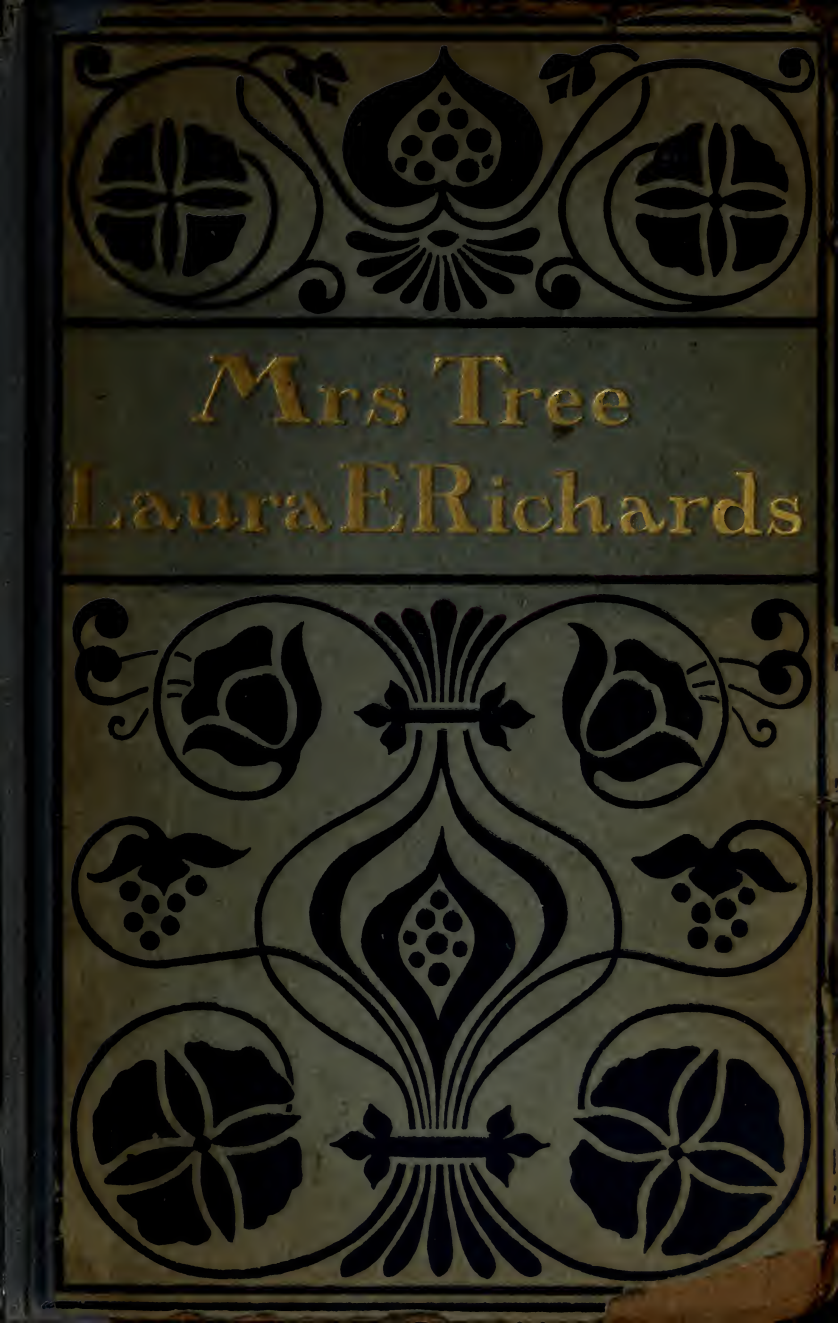
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Laura E Richards

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MRS. TREE.

MRS. TREE

By
Laura E. Richards
Author of
" Captain January," " Melody," " Marie,"etc.

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TO

My Daughter Rosalind

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MRS. TREE

CHAPTER I.

WEDDING BELLS

"WELL, they're gone!" said Direxia Hawkes.

"H'm!" said Mrs. Tree.

Direxia had been to market, and, it was to be supposed, had brought home, beside the chops and the soup-piece, all the information the village afforded. She had now, after putting away her austere little bonnet and cape, brought a china basin, and a mystic assortment of white cloths, and was polishing the window-panes, which did not need polishing. From time to time she glanced at her mistress, who sat bolt upright in her chair, engaged on a

severe-looking piece of knitting. Mrs. Tree detested knitting, and it was always a bad sign when she put away her book and took up the needles.

"Yes'm; they're gone. I see 'em go. Ithuriel Butters drove 'em over to the Junction; come in yesterday o' purpose, and put up his team at Doctor Stedman's. Ithuriel thinks a sight of Doctor Strong. Yes'm; folks was real concerned to see him go, and her too. They made a handsome couple, if they be both light-complected."

"What are you doing to that window, Direxia Hawkes?" demanded Mrs. Tree, looking up from her knitting with a glittering eye.

"I was cleanin' it."

"I'm glad to hear it. I never should have supposed so from looking at it. Perhaps you'd better let it alone."

"You're a terrible tedious woman to live with, Mis' Tree!" said Direxia.

"You're welcome to go any minute," replied Mrs. Tree.

"Yes'm," said Direxia. "What kind of sauce would you like for tea?"

"Any kind except yours," said Mrs. Tree; and then both smiled grimly, and felt better.

Direxia polished away, still with an anxious eye on the old woman whom she loved fiercely.

"He sent a message to you, last thing before he drove off. He wanted I should tell you — what's this now he said? 'Tell her to keep on growing young till I come back,' that was it. Well, he's a perfect gentleman, that's what he is."

Something clicked in Mrs. Tree's throat, but she said nothing. Mrs. Tree was over ninety, but apart from an amazing reticulation of wrinkles, netted fine and close as a brown veil, she showed little sign of her great age. As she herself said, she had her teeth and her wits, and she did not see what more any one

wanted. In her morning gown of white dimity, with folds of soft net about her throat, and a turban of the same material on her head, she was a pleasant and picturesque figure. For the afternoon she affected satin, either plum-colored, or of the cinnamon shade in which some of my readers may have seen her elsewhere, with slippers to match, and a cap suggesting the Corinthian order. In this array, majesty replaced picturesqueness, and there were those in Elmerton who quailed at the very thought of this tiny old woman, upright in her ebony chair, with the acanthus-leaf in finest Brussels nodding over her brows. The last touch of severity was added when Mrs. Tree was found knitting, as on the present occasion.

"Ithuriel Butters is a sing'lar man!" Direxia went on, investigating with exquisite nicety the corner of a pane. "He gave me a turn just now, he did so."

She waited a moment, but no sign coming, continued. "I was to Miss Phœbe 'n' Vesty's when he druv up, and we passed the time o' day. I said, 'How's Mis' Butters now, Ithuriel?' I said. I knew she'd been re'l poorly a spell back, but I hadn't heard for a consid'able time.

"'I ain't no notion!' says he.

"'What do you mean, Ithuriel Butters?' I says.

"'Just what I say,' says he.

"'Why, where is she?' I says. I thought she might be visitin', you know. She has consid'able kin round here.

"'I ain't no idee,' says he. 'I left her in the bur'in'-ground, that's all I know.'

"Mis' Tree, that woman has been dead a month, and I never knew the first word about it. They're all sing'lar people, them Butterses. She was a proper nice woman, though, this Mis' Butters. He had hopes of Di-plomy one

spell, after his last died — *she* was a reg'lar fire-skull; he didn't have much peace while she lived — died in a tantrum too, they say; scol't so hard she bust a vessel, and it run all through her, and car'd her off — but Di-plomy couldn't seem to change her state, no more'n Miss Phœbe 'n' Vesty.

"My sakes! if there ain't Miss Vesty comin' now. I'll hasten and put away these things, Mis' Tree, and be back to let her in."

Miss Vesta Blyth came soberly along the street and up the garden path. She was a quaint and pleasant picture, in her gown of gray and white foulard, with her little black silk mantle and bonnet. Some thirty years ago Miss Vesta and her sister Miss Phœbe had decided that fashion was a snare; and since then they had always had their clothes made on the same model, to the despair of Prudence Pardon, the dressmaker.

But when one looked at Vesta Blyth's face,

one was not apt to think about her clothes; one rather thought, what a pity one must look away from her presently! At least, that was what Geoffrey Strong used to say, a young man who loved Miss Vesta, and who was now gone away with his young wife, leaving sore hearts behind.

Direxia Hawkes came out on the porch to meet the visitor, closing the door behind her for an instant.

"I'm terrible glad you've come," she said. "She's lookin' for you, too, I expect, though she won't say a word. There! she's fairly rusted with grief. It'll do her good to have somebody new to chaw on; she's been chawin' on me till she's tired, and she's welcome to."

"Yes, Direxia, I know; you are most faithful and patient," said Miss Vesta, gently. "You know we all appreciate it, don't you, my good Direxia? I have brought a little sweetbread for Aunt Marcia's supper. Diploma

cooked it the way she likes it, with a little cream, and just a spoonful of white wine. There! now I will go in. Thank you, Direxia."

"Dear Aunt Marcia," the little lady said as she entered the room, "how do you do to-day? You are looking so well!"

"I've got the plague," announced Mrs. Tree, with deadly quiet.

"Dearest Aunt Marcia! what can you mean? The plague! Surely you must have mistaken the symptoms. That terrible disease is happily, I think, restricted to —"

"I've got twenty plagues!" exclaimed the old lady. "First there's Direxia Hawkes, who torments my life out all day long; and then you, Vesta, who might know better, coming every day and asking how I am. How should I be? Have you ever known me to be anything but perfectly well since you were born?"

"No, dear Aunt Marcia, I am thankful to

say I have not. It is such a singular blessing, that you have this wonderful health."

"Well, then, why can't you let my health alone? When it fails, I'll let you know."

"Yes, dear Aunt Marcia, I will try."

"Bah!" said Mrs. Tree. "You are a good girl, Vesta, but you would exasperate a saint. I am not a saint."

Miss Vesta, too polite to assent to this statement, and too truthful to contradict it, gazed mildly at her aunt, and was silent.

Mrs. Tree, after five minutes of vengeful knitting, rolled up her work deliberately, stabbed it through with the needles, and tossed it across the room.

"Well!" she said, "have you anything else to say, Vesta? I am cross, but I am not hungry, and if I were I would not eat you. Tell me something, can't you? Isn't there any gossip in this tiresome place?"

"Oh, Aunt Marcia, I cannot think of any-

thing but our dear children, Geoffrey and Vesta. We have just seen them off, you know. Indeed, I came on purpose to tell you about their departure, but you seemed — Aunt Marcia, they were sad at going, I truly think they were. It was here they first met, and found their young happiness — the Lord preserve them in it all their lives long! — there were tears in Little Vesta's eyes, dear child! but still, they are going to their own home, and of course they were full of joy too. Oh, Aunt Marcia, I must say, dear Geoffrey looked like a prince as he handed his bride into the carriage."

"Was he in red velvet and feathers?" asked Mrs. Tree. "It wouldn't surprise me in the least."

"Oh, no, dear Aunt Marcia! Nothing, I assure you, gaudy or striking, in the very least. He wore the ordinary dress of a gentleman, not conspicuous in any way. It was his air I

meant, and the look of — of pride and joy and youth — ah! it was very beautiful. Vesta was beautiful too; you saw her travelling-dress, Aunt Marcia. Did you not think it charming?"

"The child looked well enough," said Mrs. Tree. "Lord knows what sort of wife she'll make, with her head stuffed full of all kinds of notions, but she looks well, and she means well. I gave her my diamonds; did she tell you that?"

Miss Vesta's smooth brow clouded. "Yes, Aunt Marcia, she told me, and showed them to me. I had not seen them for years. They are very beautiful. I — I confess — "

"Well, what's the matter?" demanded her aunt, sharply. "You didn't want them yourself, did you?"

"Oh! surely not, dear Aunt Marcia. I was only thinking — Maria might feel, with her two daughters, that there should have been some division — "

"Vesta Blyth," said Mrs. Tree, slowly, "am I dead?"

"Dear Aunt Marcia! what a singular question!"

"Do I look as if I were going to die?"

"Surely not! I have rarely seen you looking more robust."

"Very well! When I *am* dead, you may talk to me about Maria and her two daughters; I sha'n't mind it then. What else have you got to say? I am going to take my nap soon, so if you have anything more, out with it!"

Miss Vesta, after a hurried mental review of subjects that might be soothing, made a snatch at one.

"Doctor Stedman came to see the children off. I think he is almost as sorry to lose Geoffrey as we are. It is a real pleasure to see him looking so well and vigorous. He really looks like a young man."

"Don't speak to me of James Stedman!"

exclaimed Mrs. Tree. "I never wish to hear his name again."

"Aunt Marcia! dear James Stedman! Our old and valued friend!"

"Old and valued fiddlestick! Who wanted him to come back? Why couldn't he stay where he was, and poison the foreigners? He might have been of some use there."

Miss Vesta looked distressed.

"Aunt Marcia," she said, gently, "I cannot feel as if I ought to let even you speak slightingly of Doctor Stedman. Of course we all feel deeply the loss of dear Geoffrey; I am sure no one can feel it more deeply than Phœbe and I do. The house is so empty without him; he kept it full of sunshine and joy. But that should not make us forgetful of Doctor Stedman's life-long devotion and —"

"Speaking of devotion," said Mrs. Tree, "has he asked you to marry him yet? How many times does that make?"

Miss Vesta went very pink, and rose from her seat with a gentle dignity which was her nearest approach to anger.

"I think I will leave you now, Aunt Marcia," she said. "I will come again to-morrow, when you are more composed. Good-by."

"Yes, run along!" said Mrs. Tree, and her voice softened a little. "I don't want you to-day, Vesta, that's the truth. Send me Phœbe, or Malvina Weight. I want something to 'chaw on,' as Direxia said just now."

"The dogs! I was going to say," exclaimed Direxia, using one of her strongest expressions. "You never heard me, now, Mis' Tree!"

"I never hear anything else!" said the old lady. "Go away, both of you, and let me hear myself think."

CHAPTER II.

MISS PHŒBE'S OPINIONS

"I CANNOT see that your aunt looks a day older than she did twenty years ago," said Dr. James Stedman.

Miss Vesta Blyth looked up in some trepidation, and the soft color came into her cheeks.

"You have called on her, then, James," she said. "I am truly glad. How did she — that is, I am sure she was rejoiced to see you, as every one in the village is."

Doctor Stedman chuckled, and pulled his handsome gray beard. "She may have been rejoiced," he said; "I trust she was. She said first that she hoped I had come back wiser than I went, and when I replied that I hoped I had learned a little, she said she could not

abide new-fangled notions, and that if I expected to try any experiments on her I would find myself mistaken. Yes, I find her quite unchanged, and wholly delightful. What amazing vigor! I am too old for her, that's the trouble. Young Strong is far more her contemporary than I am. Why, she is as much interested in every aspect of life as any boy in the village. Before I left I had told her all that I knew, and a good deal that I didn't."

"It is greatly to be regretted," said Miss Phœbe Blyth, pausing in an intricate part of her knitting, and looking over her glasses with mild severity, "it is greatly to be regretted that Aunt Marcia occupies herself so largely with things temporal. At her advanced age, her acute interest in — one, two, three, purl — in worldly matters, appears to me lamentable."

"I often think, Sister Phœbe," said Miss

Vesta, timidly, "that it is her interest in little things that keeps Aunt Marcia so wonderfully young."

"My dear Vesta," replied Miss Phœbe, impressively, "at ninety-one, with eternity, if I may use the expression, sitting in the next room, the question is whether any assumption of youthfulness is desirable. For my own part, I cannot feel that it is. I said something of the sort to Aunt Marcia the other day, and she replied that she was having all the eternity she desired at that moment. The expression shocked me, I am bound to say."

"Aunt Marcia does not always mean what she says, Sister Phœbe."

"My dear Vesta, if she does not mean what she says at her age, the question is, when will she mean it?"

After a majestic pause, Miss Phœbe continued, glancing at her other hearers:

"I should be the last, the very last, to re-

flect upon my mother's sister in general conversation; but Doctor Stedman being our family physician as well as our lifelong friend, and Cousin Homer one of the family, I may without impropriety, I trust, dwell on a point which distresses me in our venerable relation. Aunt Marcia is — I grieve to use a harsh expression — frivolous."

Mr. Homer Hollopeter, responding to Miss Phœbe's glance, cleared his throat and straightened his long back. He was a little gentleman, and most of what height he had was from the waist upward; his general aspect was one of waviness. His hair was long and wavy; so was his nose, and his throat, and his shirt-collar. In his youth some one had told him that he resembled Keats. This utterance, taken with the name bestowed on him by an ambitious mother with literary tastes, had colored his whole life. He was assistant in the post-office, and lived largely on the imagi-

nary romance of the letters which passed through his hands; he also played the flute, wrote verses, and admired his cousin Phœbe.

"I have often thought it a pity," said Mr. Homer, "that Cousin Marcia should not apply herself more to literary pursuits."

"I don't know what you mean by literary pursuits, Homer," said Doctor Stedman, rather gruffly. "I found her the other day reading Johnson's Dictionary by candlelight, without glasses. I thought that was doing pretty well for ninety-one."

"I — a — was thinking more about other branches of literature," Mr. Homer admitted. "The Muse, James, the Muse! Cousin Marcia takes little interest in poetry. If she could sprinkle the — a — pathway to the tomb with blossoms of poesy, it would be" — he waved his hands gently abroad — "smoother; less rough; more devoid of irregularities."

"Cousin Homer, could you find it convenient not to rock?" asked Miss Phœbe, with stately courtesy.

"Certainly, Cousin Phœbe. I beg your pardon."

It was one of Miss Phœbe's crosses that Mr. Homer would always sit in this particular chair, and would rock; the more so that when not engaged in conversation he was apt to open and shut his mouth in unison with the motion of the rockers. Miss Phœbe disapproved of rocking-chairs, and would gladly have banished this one, had it not belonged to her mother.

"I have occasionally offered to read to Cousin Marcia," Mr. Homer continued, "from the works of Keats and — other bards; but she has uniformly received the suggestion in a spirit of — mockery; of — derision; of — contumely. The last time I mentioned it, she exclaimed 'Cat's foot!' The expression struck

me, I confess, as — strange; as — singular; as — extraordinary."

"It is an old-fashioned expression, Cousin Homer," Miss Vesta put in, gently. "I have heard our Grandmother Darracott use it, Sister Phœbe."

"There's nothing improper in it, is there?" said Doctor Stedman.

"Really, my dear James," said Miss Phœbe, bending a literally awful brow on her guest, "I trust not. Do you mean to imply that the conversation of gentlewomen of my aunt's age is apt to be improper?"

"No, no," said Doctor Stedman, easily. "It only seemed to me that you were making a good deal of Mrs. Tree's little eccentricities. But, Phœbe, you said something a few minutes ago that I was very glad to hear. It is pleasant to know that I am still your family physician. That young fellow who went off the other day seems to have taken every heart

in the village in his pocket. A young rascal!"

Miss Phœbe colored and drew herself up.

"Sister Phœbe," Miss Vesta breathed rather than spoke, "James is in jest. He has the highest opinion of —"

"Vesta, I *think* I have my senses," said Miss Phœbe, kindly. "I have heard James use exaggerated language before. Candor compels me to admit, James, that I have benefited greatly by the advice and prescriptions of Doctor Strong; also that, though deploring certain aspects of his conduct while under our roof — I will say no more, having reconciled myself entirely to the outcome of the matter — we have become deeply attached to him. He is" — Miss Phœbe's voice quavered slightly — "he is a chosen spirit."

"Dear Geoffrey!" murmured Miss Vesta.

"But in spite of this," Miss Phœbe continued, graciously, "we feel the ties of ancient

friendship as strongly as ever, James, and must always value you highly, whether as physician or as friend."

"Yes, indeed, dear James," said Miss Vesta, softly.

Doctor Stedman rose from his seat. His eyes were very tender as he looked at the sisters from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Good girls!" he said. "I couldn't afford to lose my best — patients." He straightened his broad shoulders and looked round the room. "When I saw anything new over there," he said, "castle or picture-gallery or cathedral, — whatever it was, — I always compared it with this room, and it never stood the comparison for an instant. Pleasantest place in the world, to my thinking."

Miss Phœbe beamed over her spectacles. "You pay us a high compliment, James," she said. "It is pleasant indeed to feel that home still seems best to you. I confess that, great

as are the treasures of art, and magnificent as are the monuments in the cities of Europe, I have always felt that as places of residence they would not compare favorably with Elmerton."

"Quite right," said Doctor Stedman, "quite right!" and though his eyes twinkled, he spoke with conviction.

"The cities of Europe," Mr. Homer observed, "can hardly be suited, as places of residence, to — a — persons of literary taste. There is" — he waved his hands — "too much noise; too much — sound; too much — absence of tranquillity. I could wish, though, to have seen the grave of Keats."

"I brought you a leaf from his grave, Homer," said Doctor Stedman, kindly. "I have it at home, in my pocketbook. I'll bring it down to the office to-morrow. I went to the burying-ground on purpose."

"Did you so?" exclaimed Mr. Homer, his

mild face growing radiant with pleasure. "That was kind, James; that was — friendly; that was — benevolent! I shall value it highly, highly. I thank you, James. I — since you are interested in the lamented Keats, perhaps you would like" — his hand went with a fluttering motion to his pocket.

"I must go now," said Doctor Stedman, hastily. "I've stayed too long already, but I never know how to get away from this house. Good night, Phœbe! Good night, Vesta! You are looking a little tired; take care of yourself. 'Night, Homer; see you to-morrow!"

He shook hands heartily all around and was gone.

Mr. Homer sighed gently. "It is a great pity," he said, "with his excellent disposition, that James will never interest himself in literary pursuits."

His hand was still fluttering about his

pocket, and there was an unspoken appeal in his mild brown eyes.

"Have you brought something to read to us, Cousin Homer?" asked Miss Phœbe, benevolently.

Mr. Homer with alacrity drew a folded paper from his pocket.

"This is — you may be aware, Cousin Phœbe — the anniversary of the birth of the lamented Keats. I always like to pay some tribute to his memory on these occasions, and I have here a slight thing — I tossed it off after breakfast this morning — which I confess I should like to read to you. You know how highly I value your opinion, Cousin Phœbe, and some criticism may suggest itself to you, though I trust that in the main — but you shall judge for yourself."

He cleared his throat, adjusted his spectacles, and began:

"Thoughts suggested by the Anniversary of the Natal Day of the poet Keats."

"Could you find it convenient not to rock, Cousin Homer?" said Miss Phœbe.

"By all means, Cousin Phœbe. I beg your pardon. 'Thoughts'—but I need not repeat the title.

"I asked the Muse if she had one
Thrice-favored son,
Or if some one poetic brother
Appealed to her more than another.
She gazed on me with aspect high,
And tear in eye,
While musically she repeats,
'Keats!'

"She gave me then to understand,
And smilèd bland,
On Helicon the sacred Nine
Occasionally ask bards to dine.
'For most,' she said, 'we do not move,
Though we approve;
For one alone we leave our seats:
"Keats!"'"

There was a silence after the reading of the poem. Mr. Homer, slightly flushed with his own emotions, gazed eagerly at Miss Phœbe, who sat very erect, the tips of her fingers pressed together, her whole air that of a judge about to give sentence. Miss Vesta looked somewhat disturbed, yet she was the first to speak, murmuring softly, "The feeling is very genuine, I am sure, Cousin Homer!" But Miss Phœbe was ready now.

"Cousin Homer," she said, "since you ask for criticism, I feel bound to give it. You speak of the 'sacred' Nine. The word sacred appears to me to belong distinctly to religious matters; I cannot think that it should be employed in speaking of pagan divinities. The expression — I am sorry to speak strongly — shocks me!"

Mr. Homer looked pained, and opened and shut his mouth several times.

"It is an expression that is frequently used,

Cousin Phœbe," he said. "All the poets make use of it, I assure you."

"I do not doubt it in the least," said Miss Phœbe. "The poets — with a few notable exceptions — are apt to be deplorably lax in such matters. If you would confine your reading of poetry, Cousin Homer, to the works of such poets as Mrs. Hemans, Archbishop Trench, and the saintly Keble, you would not incur the danger of being led away into unsuitable vagaries."

"But Keats, Cousin Phœbe," began Mr. Homer; Miss Phœbe checked him with a wave of her hand.

"Cousin Homer, I have already intimated to you, on several occasions, that I cannot discuss the poet Keats with you. I am aware that he is considered an eminent poet, but I have not reached my present age without realizing that many works may commend themselves to even the most refined of the

masculine sex which are wholly unsuitable for ladies. We will change the subject, if you please; but before doing so, let me earnestly entreat you to remove the word 'sacred' from your poem."

CHAPTER III.

INTRODUCING TOMMY CANDY AND SOLOMON, HIS GRANDFATHER

"HERE'S that boy again!" said Direxia Hawkes.

"What boy?" asked Mrs. Tree; but her eyes brightened as she spoke, and she laid down her book with an expectant air.

"Tommy Candy. I told him I guessed you couldn't be bothered with him, but he's there."

"Show him in. Come in, child! Don't sidle! You are not a crab. Come here and make your manners."

The boy advanced slowly, but not unwillingly. He was an odd-looking child, with spiky black hair, a mouth like a circus clown, and gray eyes that twinkled almost as brightly as Mrs. Tree's own.

The gray eyes and the black exchanged a look of mutual comprehension. "How do you do, Thomas Candy?" said Mrs. Tree, formally, holding out her little hand in its white lace mitt. It was afternoon, and she was dressed to receive callers.

"Shake hands as if you meant it, boy! I said *shake hands*, not flap flippers; you are not a seal. There! that's better. How do you do, Thomas Candy?"

"How-do-you-do-Missis-Tree-I'm-pretty-well-thank-you-and-hope-you-are-the-same."

Having uttered this sentiment as if it were one word, Master Candy drew a long breath, and said in a different tone, "I came to see the bird and hear 'bout Grampy; can I?"

"*May* I, not *can* I, Tommy Candy! You mayn't see the bird; he's having his nap, and doesn't like to be disturbed; but you may hear about your grandfather. Sit down on the

stool there. Open the drawer, and see if there is anything in it."

The boy obeyed with alacrity. The drawer (it belonged to a sandalwood table, inlaid with chess-squares of pearl and malachite), being opened, proved to contain burnt almonds in an ivory box, and a silver saucer full of cubes of fig-paste, red and white. Tommy Candy seemed to find words unequal to the situation; he gave Mrs. Tree an eloquent glance, then obeyed her nod and helped himself to both sweetmeats.

"Good?" inquired Mrs. Tree.

"Bully!" said Tommy.

"Now, what do you want to hear?"

"About Grampy."

"What about him?"

"Everything! like what you told me last time."

There was a silence of perfect peace on one side, of reflection on the other.

"Solomon Candy," said Mrs. Tree, presently, "was the worst boy I ever knew."

Tommy grinned gleefully, his mouth curving up to his nose, and rumpled his spiky hair with a delighted gesture.

"Nobody in the village had any peace of their lives," the old lady went on, "on account of that boy and my brother Tom. We went to school together, in the little red schoolhouse that used to stand where the academy is now. We were always friends, Solomon and I, and he never played tricks on me, more than tying my pigtail to the back of the bench, and the like of that; but woe betide those that he didn't take a fancy to. I can hear Sally Andrews now, when she found the frog in her desk. It jumped right into her face, and fell into her apron-pocket, — we wore aprons with big pockets then, — and she screamed so she had to be taken home. That was the kind of prank Solomon was up to, every day of his

life; and fishing for schoolmaster's wig through the skylight, and every crinkum-crankum that ever was. Master Bayley used to go to sleep every recess, and the skylight was just over his head. Dear me, Sirs, how that wig did look, sailing up into the air!"

"I wish't ours wore a wig!" said Tommy, thoughtfully; then his eyes brightened. "Isaac Weight's skeered of frogs!" he said. "The apron-pockets made it better, though, of course. More, please!"

"Isaac Weight? That's the deacon's eldest brat, isn't it?"

"Yes'm!"

"His grandfather was named Isaac, too," said Mrs. Tree. "This one is named for him, I suppose. Isaac Weight — the first one — was called Squash-nose at school, I remember. He wasn't popular, and I understand Ephraim, his son, wasn't either. They called *him* Meal-bag, and he looked it. Te-hee!" she laughed,

a little dry keckle, like the click of castanets. "Did ever I tell you the trick your grandfather and my brother played on old Elder Weight and Squire Tree? That was great-grandfather to this present Weight boy, and uncle to my husband. The old squire was high in his notions, very high; he thought but little of Weights, though he sat under Elder Weight at that time. The Weights were a good stock in the beginning, I've been told, but even then they had begun to go down-hill. It was one summer, and Conference was held here in Elmerton. The meetings were very long, and every soul went that could. Elmerton was a pious place in those days. The afternoon sessions began at two o'clock and lasted till seven. Their brains must have been made of iron — or wood." Mrs. Tree clicked her castanets again.

"Well, sir, the last day there was a sight of business, and folks knew the afternoon meet-

ing would be extra long. Elder Weight and his wife (she was a Bonny; he'd never have been chosen elder if it hadn't been for her) were off in good season, and locked the door behind them; they kept no help at that time. The squire was off too, who but he, stepping up the street — dear me, Sirs, I can see him now, in his plum-colored coat and knee-breeches, silk stockings and silver buckles to his shoes. He had a Malacca cane, I remember, with a big ivory knob on it, and he washed it night and morning as if it were a baby. He was a very particular man, had his shirt-frills done up with a silver friller. Well, those boys, Solomon Candy and Tom Darracott (that was my brother), watched till they saw them safe in at the meeting-house door, and then they set to work. There was no one in the parsonage except the cat, and at the Homestead there was only the housekeeper, who was deaf as Dagon, well they knew. The

other servants had leave to go to meeting; every one went that could, as I said. Tom knew his way all over the Homestead, our house being next door. No, it's not there now. It was burned down fifty years ago, and Tom's dead as long. They took our old horse and wagon, and they slipped in at the window of the squire's study, took out his things, — his desk and chair, his footstool, the screen he always kept between him and the fire, and dear knows what all, — and loaded them up on the wagon. They worked twice as hard at that imp's doing as they would at honest work, you may be bound. Then they drove down to the parsonage with the load, and tried round till they found a window unfastened, and in they carried every single thing, into the elder's study, and then loaded up with his rattletraps, and back to the Homestead. Working like beavers they were, every minute of the afternoon. By five o'clock they had

their job done; and then in goes Tom and asks dear old Grandmother Darracott, who could not leave her room, and thought every fox was a cosset lamb, did she think father and mother (they were at the meeting too, of course) would let him and Sol Candy go and take tea and spend the night at Plum-tree Farm, three miles off, where our old nurse lived. Grandmother said 'Yes, to be sure!' for she was always pleased when the children remembered Nursey; so off those two Limbs went, and left their works behind them.

"Evening came, and Conference was over at last; and here comes the squire home, stepping along proud and stately as ever, but mortal head-weary under the pride of his wig, for he was an old man, and grudged his age, never sparing himself. He went straight into his study — it was dusk by now — and dropped into the first chair, and so to sleep. By and by old Martha came and lighted the candles,

but she never noticed anything. Why people's wits should wear out like old shoes is a thing I never could understand; unless they're made of leather in the first place, and sometimes it seems so. The squire had his nap out, I suppose, and then he woke up. When he opened his eyes, there in front of him, instead of his tall mahogany desk, was a ramshackle painted thing, with no handles to the drawers, and all covered with ink. He looked round, and what does he see but strange things everywhere; strange to his eyes, and yet he knew them. There was a haircloth sofa and three chairs, and on the walls, in place of his fine prints, was a picture of Elder Weight's father, and a couple of mourning pictures, weeping-willows and urns and the like, and Abraham and Isaac done in worsted-work, that he'd seen all his days in the parsonage parlor. Very likely they are there still."

"Yes," said Tommy, "I see 'em in his settin'-room."

"*Saw*, not *see!*" said Mrs. Tree. "Your grandfather spoke better English than you do, Tommy Candy. Learn grammar while you are young, or you'll never learn it. Well, sir, the next I know is, I was sitting in my high chair at supper with father and mother, when the door opens and in walks the old squire. His eyes were staring wild, and his wig cocked over on one ear — he was a sight to behold! He stood in the door, and cried out in a loud voice, 'Thomas Darracott, who am I?'

"My father was a quiet man, and slow to speak, and his first thought was that the squire had lost his wits.

"'Who are you, neighbor?' he says. 'Come in; come in, and we'll see.'

"The squire rapped with his stick on the floor. 'Who am I?' he shouted out. 'Am I

Jonathan Tree, or am I that thundering, blundering gogglepate, Ebenezer Weight?'

"Well, well! the words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a great noise outside, and in comes Elder Weight with his wife after him, and he in a complete caniption, screeching that he was possessed of a devil, and desired the prayers of the congregation. (My father was senior deacon at that time.)

"'I have broken the tenth commandment!' he cried. 'I have coveted Squire Tree's desk and furniture, and now I see the appearance of them in mine own room, and I know that Satan has me fast in his grip.'

"Ah, well! It's not good for you to hear these things, Tommy Candy. Solomon was a naughty boy, and Tom Darracott was another, and they well deserved the week of bread and water they got. I expect you make a third, if all was told. They grew up good men, though.

and mind you do the same. Have you eaten all the almonds?"

"'Most all!" said Tommy, modestly.

"Put the rest in your pocket, then, and run along and ask Direxia to give you a spice-cake. Leave the fig-paste. The bird likes a bit with his supper. What are you thinking of, Tommy Candy?"

Tommy rumpled his spiky hair, and gave her an elfish glance. "Candys don't seem to like Weightses," he said. "Grampy didn't, nor Dad don't; nor I don't."

"Here, you may have the fig-paste," said the old lady. "Shut the drawer. Mind you, Solomon, nor Tom either, ever did them any real harm. Solomon was a kind boy, only mischievous — that was all the harm there was to him. Even when he painted Isaac Weight's nose in stripes, he meant no harm in the world; but 'twas naughty all the same. He said he did it to make

him look prettier, and I don't know but it did. Don't you do any such things, do you hear?"

"Yes'm," said Tommy Candy.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD FRIENDS

It was drawing on toward supper-time, of a chill October day. Mrs. Tree was sitting in the twilight, as she loved to do, her little feet on the fender, her satin skirt tucked up daintily, a Chinese hand-screen in her hand. It seemed unlikely that the moderate heat of the driftwood fire would injure her complexion, which consisted chiefly of wrinkles, as has been said; but she always had shielded her face from the fire, and she always would — it was the proper thing to do. The parlor gloomed and lightened around her, the shifting light touching here a bit of gold lacquer, there a Venetian mirror or an ivory statuette. The fire purred and crackled softly; there was no

other sound. The tiny figure in the ebony chair was as motionless as one of the Indian idols that grinned at her from her mantel-shelf.

A ring at the door-bell, the shuffling sound of Direxia's soft shoes; then the opening door, and a man's voice asking some question.

In an instant Mrs. Tree sat live and alert, her ears pricked, her eyes black points of attention. Direxia's voice responded, peevish and resistant, refusing something. The man spoke again, urging some plea.

"Direxia!" said Mrs. Tree.

"Yes'm. Jest a minute. I'm seeing to something."

"Direxia Hawkes!"

When Mrs. Tree used both names, Direxia knew what it meant. She appeared at the parlor door, flushed and defiant.

"How you do pester me, Mis' Tree! There's

a man at the door, a tramp, and I don't want to leave him alone."

"What does he look like?"

"I don't know; he's a tramp, if he's nothing worse. Wants something to eat. Most likely he's stealin' the umbrellas while here I stand!"

"Show him in here," said Mrs. Tree.

"What say?"

"Show him in here; and don't pretend to be deaf, when you hear as well as I do."

"The dogs — I was going to say! You don't want him in here, Mis' Tree. He's a tramp, I tell ye, and the toughest-lookin' — "

"Will you show him in here, or shall I come and fetch him?"

"Well! of all the cantankerous — here! come in, you! she wants to see you!" and Direxia, holding the door in her hand, beckoned angrily to some one invisible. There was a murmur, a reluctant shuffle, and a man

appeared in the doorway and stood lowering, his eyes fixed on the ground; a tall, slight man, with stooping shoulders, and delicate pointed features. He was shabbily dressed, yet there was something fastidious in his air, and it was noticeable that the threadbare clothes were clean.

Mrs. Tree looked at him; looked again. "What do you want here?" she asked, abruptly.

The man's eyes crept forward to her little feet, resting on the brass fender, and stopped there.

"I asked for food," he said. "I am hungry."

"Are you a tramp?"

"Yes, madam."

"Anything else?"

The man was silent.

"There!" said Direxia, impatiently. "That'll do. Come out into the kitchen and I'll give

ye something in a bag, and you can take it with you."

"I shall be pleased to have you take supper with me, sir!" said the old lady, pointedly addressing the tramp. "Direxia, set a place for this gentleman."

The color rushed over the man's face. He started, and his eyes crept half-way up the old lady's dress, then dropped again.

"I — cannot, madam!" he said, with an effort. "I thank you, but you must excuse me."

"Why can't you?"

This time the eyes travelled as far as the diamond brooch, and rested there curiously.

"You must excuse me!" repeated the man, laboriously. "If your woman will give me a morsel in the kitchen — or — I'd better go at once!" he said, breaking off suddenly. "Good evening!"

"Stop!" said Mrs. Tree, striking her ebony

stick sharply on the floor. There was an instant of dead silence, no one stirring.

"Direxia," she added, presently, "go and set another place for supper!"

Direxia hesitated. The stick struck the floor again, and she vanished, muttering.

"Shut the door!" Mrs. Tree commanded, addressing the stranger. "Come here and sit down! No, not on that cheer. Take the ottoman with the bead puppy on it. There!"

As the man drew forward the ottoman without looking at it, and sat down, she leaned back easily in her chair, and spoke in a half-confidential tone:

"I get crumpled up, sitting here alone. Some day I shall turn to wood. I like a new face and a new notion. I had a grandson who used to live with me, and I'm lonesome since he died. How do you like tramping, now?"

"Pretty well," said the man. He spoke

over his shoulder, and kept his face toward the fire; it was a chilly evening. "It's all right in summer, or when a man has his health."

"See things, hey?" said the old lady. "New folks, new faces? Get ideas; is that it?"

The man nodded gloomily.

"That begins it. After awhile—I really think I must go!" he said, breaking off short. "You are very kind, madam, but I prefer to go. I am not fit — "

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree, and watched him like a cat.

He fell into a fit of helpless laughter, and laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. He felt for a pocket-handkerchief.

"Here's one!" said Mrs. Tree, and handed him a gossamer square. He took it mechanically. His hand was long and slim — and clean.

"Supper's ready!" snapped Direxia, glowering in at the door.

"I will take your arm, if you please!" said Mrs. Tree to the tramp, and they went in to supper together.

Mrs. Tree's dining-room, like her parlor, was a treasury of rare woods. The old mahogany, rich with curious brass-work, shone darkly brilliant against the panels of satinwood; the floor was a mosaic of bits from Captain Tree's woodpile, as he had been used to call the tumbled heap of precious fragments which grew after every voyage to southern or eastern islands. The room was lighted by candles; Mrs. Tree would have no other light. Kerosene she called nasty, smelly stuff, and gas a stinking smother. She liked strong words, especially when they shocked Miss Phœbe's sense of delicacy. As for electricity, Elmerton knew it not in her day.

The shabby man seemed in a kind of dream.

Half unconsciously he put the old lady into her seat and pushed her chair up to the table; then at a sign from her he took the seat opposite. He laid the damask napkin across his knees, and winced at the touch of it, as at the caress of a long-forgotten hand. Mrs. Tree talked on easily, asking questions about the roads he travelled and the people he met. He answered as briefly as might be, and ate sparingly. Still in a dream, he took the cup of tea she handed him, and setting it down, passed his finger over the handle. It was a tiny gold Mandarin, clinging with hands and feet to the side of the cup. The man gave another helpless laugh, and looked about him as if for a door of escape.

Suddenly, close at his elbow, a voice spoke; a harsh, rasping voice, with nothing human in it.

"Old friends!" said the voice.

The man started to his feet, white as the napkin he held.

"*My God!*" he said, violently.

"It's only the parrot!" said Mrs. Tree, comfortably. "Sit down again. There he is at your elbow. Jocko is his name. He does my swearing for me. My grandson and a friend of his taught him that, and I have taught him a few other things beside. Good Jocko! speak up, boy!"

"Old friends to talk!" said the parrot. "Old books to read; old wine to drink! Zooks! hooray for Arthur and Will! they're the boys!"

"That was my grandson and his friend," said the old lady, never taking her eyes from the man's face. "What's the matter? feel faint, hey?"

"Yes," said the man. He was leaning on the back of his chair, fighting some spasm of feeling. "I am — faint. I must get out into the air."

The old lady rose briskly and came to his

side. "Nothing of the sort!" she said. "You'll come up-stairs and lie down."

"No! no! no!" cried the man, and with each word his voice rang out louder and sharper as the emotion he was fighting gripped him closer. "Not in this house. Never! Never!"

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree. "Don't talk to me! Here! give me your arm! *Do as I say!* There!"

"Old friends!" said the parrot.

"I'm going to loose the bulldog, Mis' Tree," said Direxia, from the foot of the stairs; "and Deacon Weight says he'll be over in two minutes."

"There isn't any dog in the house," said Mrs. Tree, over the balusters, "and Deacon Weight is at Conference, and won't be back till the last of the week. That will do, Direxia; you mean well, but you are a ninny-hammer. This way!"

She twitched the reluctant arm that held hers, and they entered a small bedroom, hung with guns and rods.

"My grandson's room!" said Mrs. Tree. "He died here — hey?"

The stranger had dropped her arm and stood shaking, staring about him with wild eyes. The ancient woman laid her hand on his, and he started as at an electric shock.

"Come, Willy," she said, "lie down and rest."

He was at her feet now, half-crouching, half-kneeling, holding the hem of her satin gown in his shaking clutch, sobbing aloud, dry-eyed as yet.

"Come, Willy," she repeated, "lie down and rest on Arthur's bed. You are tired, boy."

"I came —" the shaking voice steadied itself into words, "I came — to rob you, Mrs. Tree."

"Why, so I supposed, Will; at least, I

thought it likely. You can have all you want, without that — there's plenty for you and me. Folks call me close, and I like to do what I like with my own money. There's plenty, I tell you, for you and me and the bird. Do you think he knew you, Willy? I believe he did."

"God knows! When — how did you know me, Mrs. Tree?"

"Get up, Willy Jaquith, and I'll tell you. Sit down; there's the chair you made together, when you were fifteen. Remember, hey? I knew your voice at the door, or I thought I did. Then when you wouldn't look at the bead puppy, I hadn't much doubt; and when I said 'Cat's foot!' and you laughed, I knew for sure. You've had a hard time, Willy, but you're the same boy."

"If you would not be kind," said the man, "I think it would be easier. You ought to give me up, you know, and let me go to jail.

I'm no good. I'm a vagrant and a drunkard, and worse. But you won't, I know that; so now let me go. I'm not fit to stay in Arthur's room or lie on his bed. Give me a little money, my dear old friend — yes, the parrot knew me! — and let me go!"

"Hark!" said the old woman.

She went to the door and listened. Her keen old face had grown wonderfully soft in the last hour, but now it sharpened and hardened to the likeness of a carved hickory-nut.

"Somebody at the door," she said, speaking low. "Malvina Weight."

She came back swiftly into the room. "That press is full of Arthur's clothes; take a bath and dress yourself, and rest awhile; then come down and talk to me. Yes, you will! *Do as I say!* Willy Jaquith, if you try to leave this house, I'll set the parrot on you. Remember the day he bit you for stealing his apple, and served you right? There's the scar

still on your cheek. Greatest wonder he didn't put your eyes out!"

She slipped out and closed the door after her; then stood at the head of the stairs, listening.

Mrs. Ephraim Weight, a ponderous woman with a chronic tremolo, was in the hall, a knitted shawl over her head and shoulders.

"I've waited 'most an hour to see that tramp come out," she was saying. "Deacon's away, and I was scairt to death, but I'm a mother, and I had to come. How I had the courage I don't know, when I thought you and Mis' Tree might meet my eyes both layin' dead in this entry. Where is he? Don't you help or harbor him now, Direxia Hawkes! I saw his evil eye as he stood on the doorstep, and I knew by the way he peeked and peered that he was after no good. Where is he? I know he didn't go out. Hush! don't say a word! I'll slip out and round and get Hiram Sawyer.

My boys is to singing-school, and it was a Special Ordering that I happened to look out of window just that moment of time. Where did you say he — "

"Oh, do let me speak, Mis' Weight!" broke in Direxia, in a shrill half-whisper. "Don't speak so loud! She'll hear ye, and she's in one of her takings, and I dono — lands sakes, I don't know what *to* do! I dono who he is, or whence he comes, but she — "

"Direxia Hawkes!" barked Mrs. Tree from the head of the stairs.

"There! you hear her!" murmured Direxia. "Oh, she is the beat of all! I'm comin', Mis' Tree!"

She fled up the stairs; her mistress, bending forward, darted a whispered arrow at her.

"Oh, my Solemn Deliverance!" cried Direxia Hawkes.

"Hot water, directly, and don't make a fool

of yourself!" said Mrs. Tree; and her stick tapped its way down-stairs.

"Good evening, Malvina. What can I do for you? Pray step in."

Mrs. Weight sidled into the parlor before a rather awful wave of the ebony stick, and sat down on the edge of a chair near the door. Mrs. Tree crossed the room to her own high-backed armchair, took her seat deliberately, put her feet on the crimson hassock, and leaned forward, resting her hands on the crutch-top of her stick, and her chin on her hands. In this attitude she looked more elfin than human, and the light that danced in her black eyes was not of a reassuring nature.

"What can I do for you?" she repeated.

Mrs. Weight bridled, and spoke in a tone half-timid, half-defiant.

"I'm sure, Mis' Tree, it's not on my own account I come. I'm the last one to intrude,

as any one in this village can tell you. But you are an anncient woman, and your neighbors are bound to protect you when need is. I see that tramp come in here with my own eyes, and he's here for no good."

"What tramp?" asked Mrs. Tree.

"Good land, Mis' Tree, didn't you see him? He slipped right in past Direxia. I see him with these eyes."

"When?"

"'Most an hour ago. I've been watching ever since. Don't tell me you didn't know about him bein' here, Mis' Tree, now don't."

"I won't," said Mrs. Tree, benevolently.

"He's hid away somewheres!" Mrs. Weight continued, with rising excitement. "Direxia Hawkes has hid him; he's an accomplish of hers. You've always trusted that woman, Mis' Tree, but I tell you I've had my eye on her these ten years, and now I've found her out. She's hid him away somewheres, I tell

you. There's cupboards and clusets enough in this house to hide a whole gang of cutthroats in — and when you're abed and asleep they'll have your life, them two, and run off with your worldly goods that you've thought so much of. Would have, that is, if I hadn't have had a Special Ordering to look out of winder. Oh, how thankful should I be that I kep' the use of my limbs, though I was scairt 'most to death, and am now."

"Yes, they might be useful to you," said Mrs. Tree, "to get home with, for instance. There, that will do, Malvina Weight. There is no tramp here. Your eyesight is failing; there were always weak eyes in your family. There's no tramp here, and there has been none."

"Mis' Tree! I tell you I see him with these —"

"Bah! don't talk to me!" Mrs. Tree blazed into sudden wrath. But next instant she

straightened herself over her cane, and spoke quietly.

"Good night, Malvina. You mean well, and I bear no malice. I'm obliged to you for your good intentions. What you took for a tramp was a gentleman who has come to stay overnight with me. He's up-stairs now. Did you lock your door when you came out? There *are* tramps about, so I've heard, and if Ephraim is away — well, good night, if you must hurry. Direxia, lock the door and put the chain up; and if anybody else calls to-night, set the bird on 'em."

CHAPTER V.

"BUT WHEN HE WAS YET A GREAT WAY OFF"

"AND so when she ran away and left you, you took to drink, Willy. That wasn't very sensible, was it?"

"I didn't care," said William Jaquith. "It helped me to forget for a bit at a time. I thought I could give it up any day, but I didn't. Then — I lost my place, of course, and started to come East, and had my pocket picked in Denver, every cent I had. I tried for work there, but between sickness and drink I wasn't good for much. I started tramping. I thought I would tramp — it was last spring, and warm weather coming on — till I'd got my health back, and then I'd steady down and get some work, and

come back to Mother when I was fit to look her in the face. Then — in some place, I forget what, though I know the pattern of the wall-paper by the table where I was sitting — I came upon a King's County paper with Mother's death in it."

"What!" said Mrs. Tree, straightening herself over her stick.

"Oh, it didn't make so much difference," Jaquith went on, dreamily. "I wasn't fit to see her, I knew that well enough; only — it was a green paper, with splotchy yellow flowers on it. Fifteen flowers to a row; I counted them over seven times before I could be sure. Well, I was sick again after that, I don't know how long; some kind of fever. When I got up again something was gone out of me, something that had kept me honest till then. I made up my mind that I would get money somehow, I didn't much care how. I thought of you, and the gold counters you used to let

Arthur and me play with, so that we might learn not to think too much of money. You remember? I thought I might get some of those, and you might not miss them. You didn't need them, anyhow, I thought. Yes, I knew you would give them to me if I asked for them, but I wasn't going to ask. I came here to-night to see if there was any man or dog about the house. If not, I meant to slip in by and by at the pantry window; I remembered the trick of the spring. I forgot Jocko. There! now you know all. You ought to give me up, Mrs. Tree, but you won't do that."

"No, I won't do that!" said the old woman.

She looked at him thoughtfully. His eyes were wandering about the room, a painful pleasure growing in them as they rested on one object after another. Beautiful eyes they were, in shape and color — if the light were not gone out of them.

"The bead puppy!" he said, presently. "I can remember when we wondered if it could bark. We must have been pretty small then. When did Arthur die, Mrs. Tree? I hadn't heard — I supposed he was still in Europe."

"Two years ago."

"Was it —" something seemed to choke the man.

"Fretting for her?" said Mrs. Tree, sharply. "No, it wasn't. He found her out before you did, Willy. He knew you'd find out, too; he knew who was to blame, and that she turned your head and set you crazy. 'Be good to old Will if you ever have a chance!' that was one of the last things he said. He had grippe, and pneumonia after it, only a week in all."

Jaquith turned his head away. For a time neither spoke. The fire purred and crackled comfortably in the wide fireplace. The heat brought out the scent of the various woods,

and the air was alive with warm perfume. The dim, antique richness of the little parlor seemed to come to a point in the small, alert figure, upright in the ebony chair. The fire-light played on her gleaming satin and misty laces, and lighted the fine lines of her wrinkled face. Very soft the lines seemed now, but it might be the light.

"Arthur Blyth taken and Will Jaquith left!" said the young man, softly. "I wonder if God always knows what he is about, Mrs. Tree. Are there still candied cherries in the sandalwood cupboard? I know the orange cordial is there in the gold-glass decanter with the little fat gold tumblers."

"Yes, the cordial is there," said Mrs. Tree. "It's a pity I can't give you a glass, Willy; you'll need it directly, but you can't have it. Feel better, hey?"

William Jaquith raised his head, and met the keen kindness of her eyes; for the first

time a smile broke over his face, a smile of singular sweetness.

"Why, yes, Mrs. Tree!" he said. "I feel better than I have since — I don't know when. I feel — almost — like a man again. It's better than the cordial just to look at you, and smell the wood, and feel the fire. What a pity one cannot die when one wants to. This would be ceasing on the midnight without pain, wouldn't it?"

"Why don't you give up drink?" asked Mrs. Tree, abruptly.

"Where's the use?" said Jaquith. "I would if there were any use, but Mother's dead."

"Cat'sfoot-fiddlestick-folderol-fudge!" blazed the old woman. "She's no more dead than I am. Don't talk to me! hold on to yourself now, Willy Jaquith, and don't make a scene; it is a thing I cannot abide. It was Maria Jaquith that died, over at East Corners. Small loss she was, too. None of that family was

ever worth their salt. The fool who writes for the papers put her in 'Mary,' and gave out that she died here in Elmerton just because they brought her here to bury. They've always buried here in the family lot, as if they were of some account. I was afraid you might hear of it, Willy, and wrote to the last place I heard of you in, but of course it was no use. Mary Jaquith is alive, I tell you. Now where are you going?"

Jaquith had started to his feet, dead white, his eyes shining like candles.

"To Mother!"

"Yes, I would! wake her up out of a sound sleep at ten o'clock at night, and scare her into convulsions. Sit down, Willy Jaquith; *do as I tell you!* There! feel pretty well, hey? Your mother is blind."

"Oh, Mother! Mother! and I have left her alone all this time."

"Exactly! now don't go into a caniption,

for it won't do any good. You must go to bed now, and, what's more, go to sleep; and we'll go down together in the morning. Here's Direxia now with the gruel. There! hush! don't say a word!"

The old serving-woman entered bearing a silver tray, on which was a covered bowl of India china, a small silver saucepan, and something covered with a napkin. William Jaquith went to a certain corner and brought out a tea-poy of violet wood, which he set down at the old lady's elbow.

"There!" said Direxia Hawkes. "Did you ever?"

She was shaking all over, but she set the tray down carefully. Jaquith took the saucepan from her hand and set it on the hob. Then he lifted the napkin. Under it were two plates, one of biscuits, the other of small cakes shaped like a letter S.

"Snaky cakies!" said Will Jaquith. "Oh,

Direxia! give me a cake and I'll give you a kiss! Is that right, you dear old thing?"

He stooped to kiss the withered brown cheek; the old woman caught up her apron to her face.

"It's him! it's him! it's one of my little boys, but where's the other? Oh, Mis' Tree, I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

Mrs. Tree watched her, dry-eyed.

"Cry away, so long as you don't cry into the gruel," she said, kindly. "You are an old goose, Direxia Hawkes. I haven't been able to cry for ten years, Willy. Here! take the 'postle spoon and stir it. Has she brought a cup for you?"

"Well, I should hope I had!" said Direxia, drying her eyes. "I ain't quite lost my wits, Mis' Tree."

"You never had enough to lose!" retorted her mistress. "Hark! there's Jocko wanting his gruel. Bring him in; and mind you take

a sup yourself before you go to bed, Direxia! You're all shaken up."

"Gadzooks!" said the parrot. "The cup that cheers! Go to bed, Direxia! Direxia Hawkes, wife of Guy Fawkes!"

"Now look at that!" said Direxia. "Ain't you ashamed, Willy Jaquith? He ain't said that since you went away."

The next morning was bright and clear. Mrs. Malvina Weight, sweeping her front chamber, with an anxious eye on the house opposite, saw the door open and Mrs. Tree come out, followed by a tall young man. The old lady wore the huge black velvet bonnet, surmounted by a bird of paradise, which she had brought from Paris forty years before, and an India shawl which had pointed a moral to the pious of Elmerton for more than that length of time. "Adorning her perishing back with what would put food in the mouth of

twenty Christian heathens for a year!" was the way Mrs. Weight herself expressed it.

This morning, however, Mrs. Weight had no eyes for her aged neighbor. Every faculty she possessed was bent on proving the identity of the stranger. He kept his face turned from her in a way that was most exasperating. Could it be the man she saw last night? If her eyes were going as bad as that, she must see the optician next time he came through the village, and be fitted a new pair of glasses; it was scandalous, after paying him the price she did no more than five years ago, and him saying they'd last her lifetime. Why, this was a gentleman, sure enough. It must be the same, and them shadows, looking like rags, deceived her. Well, anybody living, except Mis' Tree, would have said his name, if it wasn't but just for neighborliness. Who could it be? Not that Doctor Strong back again, just when they

were well rid of him? No, this man was taller, and stoop-shouldered. Seemed like she had seen that back before.

She gazed with passionate yearning till the pair passed out of sight, the ancient woman leaning on the young man's arm, yet stepping briskly along, her ebony staff tapping the sidewalk smartly.

Mrs. Weight called over the stairs.

"Isick, be you there?"

"Yep!"

"Why ain't you to school, I'd like to know? Since you be here, jest run round through Candy's yard and come back along the street, that's a good boy, and see who that is Mis' Tree's got with her."

"I can't! I got the teethache!" whined Isaac.

"It won't hurt your teethache any. Run now, and I'll make you a saucer-pie next time I'm baking."

"You allers say that, and then you never!" grumbled Isaac, dragging reluctant feet toward the door.

"Isick Weight, don't you speak to me like that! I'll tell your pa, if you don't do as I tell you."

"Well, ain't I goin', quick as I can? I won't go through Candy's yard, though; that mean Tom Candy's waitin' for me now with a big rock, 'cause I got him sent home for actin' in school. I'll go and ask the man who he is. S'pose he knows."

"You won't do nothing of the sort. There! no matter — it's too late now. You're a real aggravatin', naughty-actin' boy, Isick Weight, and I believe you've been sent home your own self for cuttin' up — not that I doubt Tommy Candy was, too. I shall ask your father to whip you good when he gits home."

"Well, Mary Jaquith, here you sit."

"Mrs. Tree! Is this you? My dear soul, what brings you out so early in the morning? Come in! come in! Who is with you?"

"I didn't say any one was with me!" snapped Mrs. Tree. "Don't you go to setting up double-action ears like mine, Mary, because you are not old enough. How are you? obstinate as ever?"

The blind woman smiled. In her plain print dress, she had the air of a masquerading duchess, and her blue eyes were as clear and beautiful as those which were watching her from the door.

"Take this chair," she said, pushing forward a straight-backed armchair. "It's the one you always like. How am I obstinate, dear Mrs. Tree?"

"If I've asked you once to come and live with me, I've asked you fifty times," grumbled the old lady, sitting down with a good deal of flutter and rustle. "There I must stay, left

alone at my age, with nobody but that old goose of a Direxia Hawkes to look after me. And all because you like to be independent. Set you up! Well, I sha'n't ask you again, and so I've come to tell you, Mary Jaquith."

"Dear old friend, you forgive me, I know. You never can have thought for a moment, seriously, that I could be a burden on your kind hands. There surely is some one with you, Mrs. Tree! Is it Direxia? Please be seated, whoever it is."

She turned her beautiful face and clear, quiet eyes toward the door. There was a slight sound, as of a sob checked in the outbreak. Mrs. Tree shook her head, fiercely. The blind woman rose from her seat, very pale.

"Who is it?" she said. "Be kind, please, and tell me."

"I'm going to tell you," said Mrs. Tree, "if you will have patience for two minutes, and not drive every idea out of my head with your

questions. Mary, I — I had a visitor last night. Some one came to see me — an old acquaintance — who had — who had heard of Willy lately. Willy is — doing well, my dear. Now, Mary Jaquith, if you don't sit down, I won't say another word. Of all the unreasonable women I ever saw in my life — "

Mrs. Tree stopped, and rose abruptly from her seat. The blind woman was holding out her arms with a heavenly gesture of appeal, of welcome, of love unutterable: her face was the face of an angel. Another moment, and her son's arms were round her, and her head on his bosom, and he was crying over and over again, "Mother! mother! mother!" as if he could not have enough of the word.

"Arthur was a nice boy, too!" said Mrs. Tree, as she closed the door behind her.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Weight, hurrying up the plank walk which led to the Widow

Jaquith's door, was confronted by the figure of her opposite neighbor, sitting on the front doorstep, leaning her chin on her stick, and looking, as Mrs. Weight told the deacon afterward, like Satan's grandmother.

"Want to see Mary Jaquith?" asked Mrs. Tree. "Well, she's engaged, and you can't. Here! give me your arm, Viny, and take me over to the girls'. I want to see how Phœbe is this morning. She was none too spry yesterday."

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW POSTMASTER

Politics had little hold in Elmerton. When any question of public interest was to be settled, the elders of the village met and settled it; if they disagreed among themselves, they went to Mrs. Tree, and she told them what to do. People sometimes wondered what would happen when Mrs. Tree died, but there seemed no immediate danger of this. "Truth and Trees live forever!" was the saying in the village.

When Israel Nudd, the postmaster, died, Elmerton found little difficulty in recommending his successor. The day after his funeral, the elders assembled at the usual place of meeting, the post-office piazza. This was a

narrow platform running along one side of the post-office building, and commanding a view of the sea. A row of chairs stood along the wall on their hind legs. They might be supposed to have lost the use of their fore legs, simply because they never were used. In these chairs the elders sat, and surveyed the prospect.

"Tide's makin'," said John Peavey.

No one seemed inclined to contradict this statement.

"Water looks rily," John Peavey continued. "Goin' to be a change o' weather."

"I never see no sense in that," remarked Seth Weaver. "Why should a change of weather make the water rily beforehand? Besides, it ain't."

"My Uncle Ammi lived to a hundred and two," said John Peavey, slowly, "and he never doubted it. You're allers contrary, Seth. If I said I had a nose on my face, you'd say it warn't so."

"Wal, some might call it one," rejoined Seth, with a cautious glance. "I ain't fond of committin' myself."

"Meetin' come to order!" said Salem Rock, interrupting this preliminary badinage.

"Brether— I — I would say, gentlemen, we have met to recommend a postmaster for this village, in the room of Israel Nudd, diseased. What is your pleasure in this matter? I s'pose Homer'd ought to have it, hadn't he?"

The conclave meditated. No one had the smallest doubt that Homer ought to have it, but it was not well to decide matters too hastily.

"Homer's none too speedy," said Abram Cutter. "He gets to moonin' over the mail sometimes, and it seems as if you'd git Kingdom Come before you got the paper. But I never see no harm in Home."

"Not a mite," was the general verdict.

"Homer's as good as gingerbread," said Salem Rock, heartily. "He knows the business, ben in it sence he was a boy, and there's no one else doos. My 'pinion, he'd oughter have the job."

He spoke emphatically, and all the others glanced at him with approval; but there was no hurry. The mail would not be in for half an hour yet.

"There's the *Fidely*," said Seth Weaver. "Goin' up river for logs, I expect."

A dingy tug came puffing by. As she passed, a sooty figure waved a salutation, and the whistle screeched thrice. Seth Weaver swung his hat in acknowledgment.

"Joe Derrick," he said. "Him and me run her a spell together last year."

"How did she run?" inquired John Peavey.

"Like a wu'm with the rheumatiz," was the reply. "The logs in the river used to roll

over and groan, to see lumber put together in such shape. She ain't safe, neither. I told Joe so when I got out. I says, 'It's time she was to her long home,' I says, 'but I don't feel no call to be one of the bearers,' I says. Joe's reckless. I expect he'll keep right on till she founders under him, and then walk ashore on his feet. They are bigger than some rafts I've seen, I tell him."

"Speaking of bearers," said Abram Cutter, "hadn't we ought to pass a vote of thanks to Isr'el, or something?"

"What for? turnin' up his toes?" inquired the irrepressible Seth. "I dono as he did it to obleege us, did he?"

"I didn't mean that," said Abram, patiently. "But he was postmaster here twenty-five years, and seems's though we'd ought to take some notice of it."

"That's so!" said Salem Rock. "You're

right, Abram. What we want is some resolutions of sympathy for the widder. That's what's usual in such cases."

"Humph!" said Seth Weaver.

The others looked thoughtful.

"How would you propose to word them resolutions, Brother Rock?" asked Enoch Peterson, cautiously. "I understand Mis' Nudd accepts her lot. Isr'el warn't an easy man to live with, I'm told by them as was neighbor to him."

He glanced at Seth Weaver, who cleared his throat and gazed seaward. The others waited. Presently —

"If I was drawin' up them resolutions," Weaver said, slowly, "'pears to me I should say something like this:

"'Resolved, that Isr'el Nudd was a good postmaster, and done his work faithful; and resolved, that we tender his widder all the respeckful sympathy she requires.' And a

peanut-shell to put it in!" he added, in a lower tone.

Salem Rock pulled out a massive silver watch and looked at it.

"I got to go!" he said. "Let's boil this down! All present who want Homer Hollopeter for postmaster, say so; contrary-minded? It's a vote! We'll send the petition to Washin'ton. Next question is, who'll he have for an assistant?"

There was a movement of chairs, as with fresh interest in the new topic.

"I was intendin' to speak on that p'int!" piped up a little man at the end of the row, who had not spoken before.

"What do we need of an assistant? Homer Hollopeter could do the work with one hand, except Christmas and New Years. There ain't room enough in there to set a hen, anyway."

"Who wants to set hens in the post-office?' demanded Seth Weaver. "There's cacklin

enough goes on there without that. I expect about the size of it is, you'd like more room to set by the stove, without no eggs to set on."

"I was only thinkin' of savin' the gov'-ment!" said the little man, uneasily.

"I reckon gov'ment's big enough to take care of itself!" said Seth Weaver.

"There's allers been an assistant," said Salem Rock, briefly. "Question is, who to have?"

At this moment a window-blind was drawn up, and the meek head of Mr. Homer Hollopeter appeared at the open window.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen!" he said, nervously. A great content shone in his mild brown eyes, — indeed, he must have heard every word that had been spoken, — but he shuffled his feet and twitched the blind uneasily after he had spoken.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Postmaster!" said Salem Rock, heartily.

"Congratulations, Home!" said Seth Weaver. The others nodded and grunted approvingly.

"There's nothing official yet, you understand," Salem Rock added, kindly; "but we've passed a vote, and the rest is only a question of time."

"Only a question of time!" echoed Abram Cutter and John Peavey.

Mr. Homer drew himself up and settled his sky-blue necktie.

"Gentlemen," he said, his voice faltering a little at first, but gaining strength as he went on, "I thank you for the honor you do me. I am deeply sensible of it, and of the responsibility of the position I am called upon to fill; to — occupy; — to — a — become a holder of."

"Have a lozenger, Home!" said Seth Weaver, encouragingly.

"I — am obliged to you, Seth; not any!" said Mr. Homer, slightly flustered. "I was about to say that my abilities, such as they

are, shall be henceforth devoted to the service — to the — amelioration; to the — mental, moral, and physical well-being — of my country and my fellow citizens. Ahem! I suppose — I believe it is the custom — a — in short, am I at liberty to choose an assistant?"

"We were just talkin' about that," said Salem Rock.

"Yes, you choose your own assistant, of course; but — well, it's usual to choose someone that's agreeable to folks. I believe the village has generally had some say in the matter; not officially, you understand, just kind of complimentary. We nominate you, and you kind o' consult us about who you'll have in to help. That seems about square, don't it? Doctor Stedman recommended you to Isr'el, I remember."

There was an assenting hum.

Mr. Homer leaned out of the window, all his self-consciousness gone.

"Mr. Rock," he said, eagerly, "I wish most earnestly — I am greatly desirous of having William Jaquith as my assistant. I — he appears to me a most suitable person. I beg, gentlemen — I hope, boys, that you will agree with me. The only son of his mother, and she is a widow."

He paused, and looked anxiously at the elders.

They had all turned toward him when he appeared, some even going so far as to set their chairs on four legs, and hitching them forward so that they might command a view of their beneficiary.

But now, with one accord, they turned their faces seaward, and became to all appearance deeply interested in a passing sail.

"The only son of his mother, and she is a widow!" Mr. Homer repeated, earnestly.

Salem Rock crossed and recrossed his legs uneasily.

"That's all very well, Homer," he said. "No man thinks more of Scripture than what I do, in its place; but this ain't its place. This ain't a question of widders, it's a question of the village. Will Jaquith is a crooked stick, and you know it."

"He has been, Brother Rock, he has been!" said Mr. Homer, eagerly. "I grant you the past; but William is a changed man, he is, indeed. He has suffered much, and a new spirit is born in him. His one wish is to be his mother's stay and support. If you were to see him, Brother Rock, and talk with him, I am sure you would feel as I do. Consider what the poet says: 'The quality of mercy is not strained!'"

"Mebbe it ain't, so fur!" said Seth Weaver; "question is, how strong its back is. If I was Mercy, I should consider Willy Jaquith quite a lug. Old man Butters used to say:

"'Rollin' stones you keep your eyes on!
Some on 'em's pie, and some on 'em's pison.'"

"— His appointment would be acceptable to the ladies of the village, I have reason to think," persisted Mr. Homer. "My venerable relative, Mrs. Tree, expressed herself strongly —" (Mr. Homer blinked two or three times, as if recalling something of an agitating nature) — "I may say *very* strongly, in favor of it; in fact, the suggestion came in the first place from her, though I had also had it in mind."

There was a change in the atmosphere; a certain rigidity of neck and set of chin gradually softened and disappeared. The elders shuffled their feet, and glanced one at another.

"It mightn't do no harm to give him a try," said Abram Cutter. "Homer's ben clerk himself fifteen year, and he knows what's wanted."

"That's so," said the elders.

"After all," said Salem Rock, "it's Homer

has the appointin'; all we can do is advise. If you're set on givin' Will Jaquith a chance, Homer, and if Mis' Tree answers for him — why, I dono as we'd ought to oppose it. Only, you keep your eye on him! Meetin's adjourned."

The elders strolled away by ones and twos, each with his word of congratulation or advice to the new postmaster. Seth Weaver alone lingered, leaning on the window-ledge. His eyes — shrewd blue eyes, with a twinkle in them — roamed over the rather squalid little room, with its two yellow chairs, its painted pine table and rusty stove.

"Seems curus without Isr'el," he said, meditatively. "Seems kind o' peaceful and empty, like the hole in your jaw where you've had a tooth hauled; or like stoppin' off takin' physic."

"Israel was an excellent postmaster," said Mr. Homer, gently. "I thought your resolu-

tions were severe, Seth, though I am aware that they were offered partly in jest."

"You never lived next door to him!" said Seth.

CHAPTER VII.

IN MISS PENNY'S SHOP

ONE of the pleasantest places in Elmerton was Miss Penny Pardon's shop. Miss Penny (short for Penelope) and Miss Prudence were sisters; and as there was not enough dress-making in the village to keep them both busy at all seasons, and as Miss Penny was lame and could not "go" much, as we say in the village, she kept this little shop, through which one passed to reach the back parlor where Miss Prudence cut and fitted and stitched. It was a queer little shop. There were a few toys, chiefly dolls, beautifully dressed by Miss Prudence, with marbles and tops in their season for the boys; there was a little fancy work, made by various invalid neighbors, which

Miss Penny undertook to sell "if 'twas so she could," without profit to herself; a little stationery, and a few small wares, thread and needles, hairpins and whalebone — and there were a great many birds. Elmerton was a great place for cage-birds, and Miss Penny was "knowing" about them; consequently, when any bird was ailing, it was brought to her for advice and treatment, and there were seldom less than half a dozen cages in the sunny window. One shelf was devoted to stuffed birds, it being the custom, when a favorite died, to present it to Miss Penny for her collection; and thus the invalid canaries and mino birds were constantly taught to know their end, which may or may not have tended to raise their spirits.

One morning Miss Penny was bustling about her shop, feeding the birds and talking to Miss Prudence, the door between the two rooms being open. She was like a bird herself, Miss

Penny, with her quick motions and bright eyes, her halting walk which was almost a hop, and a way she had of cocking her head on one side as she talked.

"So I says, 'Of course I'll take him, Mis' Tree, and glad to. He'll be company for both of us,' I says. And it's true. I'd full as lieves hear that bird talk as many folks I know, and liever. I told her I guessed about a week would set him up good, taking the Bird Manna reg'lar, and the Bitters once in a while. A little touch of asthmy is what he's got; it hasn't taken him down any, as I can see; he's as full of the old Sancho as ever. Willy Jaquith brought him down this morning, while you was to market. How that boy has improved! Why, he's an elegant-appearing young man now, and has such a pretty way with him — well, he always had that — but now he's kind of sad and gentle. I shouldn't suppose he had any too long to live, the way he looks now. Well,

hasn't Mary Jaquith had a sight of trouble, for one so good? Dear me, Prudence, the day she married George Jaquith, she seemed to have the world at her feet, didn't she?"

"*Eheu fugaces*," said a harsh voice from a corner.

"There, hear him!" said Miss Penny. "I do admire to hear him speak French. Yes, Jocko, he was a clever boy, so he was. Pretty soon Penny'll get round to him, and give him a good washing, a Beauty Bird, and feed him something real good."

"'*Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume,*
Labuntur anni;'

tell that to your granny!" said Mrs. Tree's parrot, turning a bright yellow eye on her knowingly.

"Bless your heart, she wouldn't understand if I did. She never had your advantages, dear," said Miss Penny, admiringly. "Here,

now you have had a nice nap, and I'll move you out into the sun, and give you a drop of Bird Bitters. Take it now, a Beauty Boy. Prudence, I wish't you could see him; he's taking it just as clever! I never did see the beat of this bird for knowingness."

"Malviny Weight was askin' me about them Bitters," said Miss Prudence's voice from the inner room. "She wanted to know if there was alcohol in 'em, and if you thought it was right to tempt dumb critters."

"She didn't! Well, if she ain't a case! What did you say to her, Prudence? Hush! hush to goodness! Here she is this minute. Good morning, Mis' Weight! You're quite a stranger. Real seasonable, ain't it, this mornin'?"

"'Tis so!" responded the newcomer, who entered, breathing heavily. "I feel the morning air, though, in my bronical tubes. I hadn't ought to go out before noon, but I

wanted to speak to Prudence about turnin' my brown skirt. Is she in?"

"Yes'm, she's in. You can pass right through. The door's open."

"Crickey!" said Mrs. Tree's parrot, "What a figurehead!"

"Who's that?" demanded Mrs. Weight, angrily.

Miss Penny turned her back hastily, and began arranging toys on a shelf.

"Why, that's Mis' Tree's parrot, Mis' Weight," she said. "That's Jocko. You must know him as well as I do, and better, livin' opposite neighbor to her."

"I should think I did know him, for a limb of Satan!" said the visitor. "But I never looked for him here. Is he sick? I wish to gracious he'd die. It's my belief he's possessed, like some others I know of. I'm not one to spread, or I could tell you stories about that bird —"

She nodded mysteriously, and glanced at the parrot, who had turned upside down on his perch, and was surveying her with a malevolent stare.

"Why, Mis' Weight, I was just sayin' how cute he was. He'll talk just as pretty sometimes — won't you, Jocko? Say something for Mis' Weight, won't you, Beauty Boy?"

"Helen was a beauty!" crooned the parrot, his head on one side, his eyes still fixed on Mrs. Weight.

"Was she?" said Miss Penny, encouragingly. "I want to know! Now, who do you s'pose he means? There's nobody name of Helen here now, except Doctor Pottle's little girl, a .d she squints."

"Helen was a beauty,
Xantippe was a shrew;
Medusa was a Gorgon,
And so — are — *you!*

Ha! ha! ha! crickey! she carries Weight, she rides a race, 'tis for a thousand pound. Screeeeeee!"

Swinging himself upright, the parrot flapped his wings, and uttered a blood-curdling shriek. Mrs. Weight gave a single squawk, and fled into the inner room, slamming the door violently after her.

"How you can harbor Satan, Prudence Pardon, is more than I can understand," she panted, purple with rage. "If there was a *man* in this village, he'd wring that bird's neck."

Miss Prudence was removing pins from her mouth, preparatory to a reply, when Miss Penny appeared, very pink, it might be with indignation at the parrot's misconduct.

"There, Mis' Weight!" she said, soothingly, "I'm real sorry. You mustn't mind what a bird says. It's only what those wild boys taught him, Arthur Blyth and Willy Jaquith, and I'm sure neither one of 'em would do it

to-day, let alone Arthur's being dead. Why, he says it off same as he would a psalm, if they'd taught him that, as of course it's a pity they didn't. You won't mind now, will you, Mis' Weight?"

Mrs. Weight, very majestic, deposited her bundle on the table, and sat down.

"I say nothing of the dead," she proclaimed, after a pause, "and but little of the livin'; but I should be lawth to have the load on my shoulders that Mis' Tree has. The Day of Judgment will attend to Arthur Blyth, but she is responsible for Will Jaquith's comin' back to this village, and how she can sleep nights is a mystery to me. I thank Gracious *I* see through him at once. Some may be deceived, but I'm not one of 'em."

"Now, Mis' Weight, I wouldn't talk so, if I was you," said Miss Penny, still soothingly. "Willy Jaquith's doing real pretty in the office, everybody says. Mr. Homer's tickled

to death to have him there, and they've got the place slicked up so you wouldn't know it. I always thought Homer Hollopeter had a sufferin' time under Isr'el Nudd, though he never said anything. It's not his way."

"What did you say you wanted done with this skirt?" asked Miss Prudence breaking in. She had less patience than Miss Penny, and she bent her steel-bowed spectacles on the visitor with a look which meant, "Come to business, if you have any!"

"Well, I don't hardly know!" said Mrs. Weight, unrolling her bundle. "I'm so upset with that screeching Limb there, I feel every minute as if I should have palpitations. It does seem as if the larger I got the frailer I was inside. The co'ts of my stom—"

"I thought you said 'twas a skirt!" Miss Prudence broke in again, grimly.

"So 'tis. There! I got something on this front brea'th the other day, and it won't come

out, try all I can. I thought mebbe you could — "

She plunged into depths of pressing and turning. At this moment the shop-bell rang, and Miss Penny slipped back to her post.

"Good mornin', Miss Vesta! Well, you are a sight for sore eyes, as the saying is."

"I thank you, Penelope. How do you do this morning?" inquired Miss Vesta Blyth. "I trust you and Prudence are both well."

"Yes'm, we're real smart, sister 'n' me both. Sister's had the lumbago some this last week, and my limb has pestered me so I couldn't step on it none too lively, but otherways we're *real* smart. I expect you've come to see about Darlin' here."

She took a cage from the window and placed it on the counter. In it was a yellow canary, which at sight of its mistress gave a joyous flap of its golden wings, and instantly broke into a flood of song.

"Oh!" said Miss Vesta, with a soft coo of surprise and pleasure.

"He has found his voice again. And he looks quite, quite himself. Why, Penelope, what have you done to him to make such a difference in these few days? Dear little fellow! I am so pleased!"

Miss Penny beamed. "I guess you ain't no more pleased than I be," she said. "There! I hated to see him sittin' dull and bunchy like he was when you brought him in. I've ben givin' him Bird Manna and Bitters right along, and I've bathed them spots till they're all gone. I guess you'll find him 'most as good as new. Little Beauty Darlin', so he was!"

"Old friends!" said the parrot, ruffling himself all over and looking at Miss Vesta. "Vesta, Vesta, how's Phœbe?"

"Jocko here!" said Miss Vesta. "Good morning, Jocko!"

"SHE PUT OUT A FINGER, AND JOCKO CLAWED WITHOUT CEREMONY."

She put out a finger, and Jocko clawed it without ceremony.

"I advised Aunt Marcia to send him to you, Penelope, and I am so glad she has done so. He seemed quite croupy yesterday, and at his age, of course, even a slight ailment may prove serious."

"How old *is* that bird, Miss Vesta, if I may ask?" said Miss Penny.

"I know he's older'n I be, but I never liked to inquire his age of Direxia; she might think it was a reflection."

"I remember Jocko as long as I remember anything," said Miss Vesta. "I used to be afraid of him when I was a child, he swore so terribly. The story was that he had belonged to a French marquis in the time of the Revolution; he certainly knew many — violent expressions in that language."

"I want to know if he did!" exclaimed

Miss Penny, regarding the parrot with something like admiring awe.

"Why, I've never heard him use any strong expressions, Miss Vesta. He does speak French sometimes, but it doesn't sound like swearin', not a mite. Not ten minutes ago he was sayin' something about Jehu; sounded real Scriptural."

"Oh, I have not heard him swear for years," said Miss Vesta. "Aunt Marcia cured him by covering the cage whenever he said anything unsuitable. He never does it now, unless he sees some one he dislikes very much indeed, and of course he is not apt to do that. Poor Jocko! good boy!"

"*Arma virumque cano!*" said Jocko. "Vesta, Vesta, don't you pester! ri fol liddy fo li, tiddy fo liddy fol li!"

"Ain't it mysterious?" said Miss Penny, in an awestricken voice. "There! it always makes me think of the Tower of Babel. Did

you want to take little Darlin' back to-day, Miss Blyth? I was thinkin' I'd keep him a day or two longer till his feathers looked real handsome and full. I don't suppose you'd want him converted red, would you, Miss Vesta? I'm told they're real handsome, but I don't s'pose you'd want to resk his health."

"I do not understand you, Penelope," said Miss Vesta. "Red? You surely would not think of dyeing a living bird?"

"No'm! oh, no, cert'in not, though I have heerd of them as did. But my bird book says, feed a canary red pepper and he'll turn red, and stay so till next time he moults. I never should venture to resk a bird's health, not unless the parties wished it, but they do say it's real handsome."

"I should think it very wrong, Penelope," said Miss Vesta, seriously. "Apart from the question of the dear little creature's health, it would shock me very much. It would be like

— a — dyeing one's own hair to give it a different color from what the Lord intended. I am sure you would not seriously think of such a thing."

"Oh, no'm!" said Miss Penny, guiltily conscious of certain bottles on an upper shelf warranted to "restore gray hair to its youthful gloss and gleam."

"Well, then, I'll just feed him the Bird Manna, say till Saturday, and by that time he'll be his own beauty self; the handsomest canary in Elmerton. Won't he, Darlin'?"

"And I hope Silas Candy is prepared to answer for it at the Judgment Seat!" said Mrs. Weight, in the doorway of the inner room. "Between him and Mis' Tree that Tommy promises to be fruit for the gallus if ever it bore any. Every sheet on the line with 'Squashnose' wrote on it, and a picture of Isick that anybody would know a mile off, and all in green paint. Oh, good morning,

Vesta! Why, I thought for sure you must be sick; you weren't out to meeting yesterday."

"No, I was not," said Miss Vesta, mildly. "I trust you are quite well, Malvina, and that the deacon's rheumatism is giving him less trouble lately?"

"If Malviny Weight ain't a case!" chuckled Miss Penny, as the two visitors left the shop together. "I do admire to see Miss Vesta handle her, so pretty and polite, and yet with the tips of her fingers, like she would a dusty chair. There! what was I sayin' the other day? The Blyth girls is ladies, and Malviny Weight —"

"Malviny Weight is a pokin', peerin', pryin' poll-parrot!" said Miss Prudence's voice, sharply; "that's what she is!"

"Why, Prudence Pardon, how you talk!" said Miss Penny.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TEA-PARTY

"I WISH we might have had William Jaquith as well," said Miss Vesta. "It would have pleased Mary, and every one says he is doing so well."

"I am quite as well satisfied as it is, my dear Vesta," replied Miss Phœbe. "Let me see; one, two, three — six cups and saucers, if you please; the gold-sprigged ones, and the plates to match. I think it is just as well not to have William Jaquith. I rejoice in his reform, and trust it will be as permanent as it is apparently sincere; but with Mr. and Mrs. Bliss — no, Vesta, I feel that the combination would hardly have been suitable. Besides, he and Cousin Homer could not both leave the office at once, so early in the evening."

"That is true," said Miss Vesta. "Which bowl shall we use for the wine jelly, Sister Phœbe? I think the color shows best in this plain one with the gold stars; or do you prefer the heavy fluted one?"

The little lady was perched on the pantry-steps, and looked anxiously down at Miss Phœbe, who, comfortably seated, on account of her rheumatism, was vainly endeavoring to find a speck of dust on cup or dish.

"The star-bowl is best, I am convinced,' said Miss Phœbe, gravely; then she sighed.

"I sometimes fear that cut glass is a snare, Vesta. The pride of the eye! I tremble, when I look at all these dishes."

"Surely, Sister Phœbe," said Miss Vesta, gently, "there can be no harm in admiring beautiful things. The Lord gave us the sense of beauty, and I have always counted it one of his choicest mercies."

"Yes, Vesta; but Satan is full of wiles. I

have not your disposition, and when I look at these shelves I am distinctly conscious that there is no such glass in Elmerton, perhaps none in the State. In china Aunt Marcia surpasses us, — naturally, having all the Tree china, and most of the Darracott; I have always felt that we have less Darracott china than is ours by right, — but in glass we stand alone. At times I feel that it may be my duty to give away, or sell for the benefit of the heathen, all save the few pieces which we actually need."

"Surely, Sister Phœbe, you would not do that!" said Miss Vesta, aghast. "Think of all the associations! Four generations of cut glass!"

"No, Vesta, I would not," said Miss Phœbe, sadly; "and that shows the snare plainly, and my feet in it. We are perishable clay! Suppose we put the cream in the gold-ribbed glass pitcher to-night, instead of the silver one; it

will go better with the gold-sprigged cups. After all, for whom should we display our choicest possessions if not for our pastor?"

Little Mr. Bliss, the new minister, was not observant, and beyond a vague sense of comfort and pleasure, knew nothing of the exquisite features of Miss Phœbe's tea-table. His wife did, however, and as she said afterward, felt better every time the delicate porcelain of her teacup touched her lips. Mrs. Bliss had the tastes of a duchess, and was beginning life on a salary of five hundred dollars a year and a house. Doctor Stedman and Mr. Homer Hollopeter, too, appreciated the dainty service of the Temple of Vesta, each in his own way; and a pleasant cheerfulness shone in the faces of all as Diploma Crotty handed round her incomparable Sally Lunns, with a muttered assurance to each guest that she did not expect they were fit to eat.

"Phœbe," said Doctor Stedman, "I never

can feel more than ten years old when I sit down at this table. I hope you have put me — yes, this is my place. Here is the mark. You set this table, Vesta?"

Miss Vesta blushed, the blush of a white rose at sunset.

"Yes, James," she said, softly. "I remembered where you like to sit."

"You see this dent?" said Doctor Stedman, addressing his neighbor, Mrs. Bliss; "I made that when I was ten years old. I used to be here a great deal, playing with Nathaniel, Miss Blyth's brother, and we were always cautioned not to touch this table. It was always, as you see it now, a shining mirror, and every time a little warm paw was laid on it, it left a mark. This, however, was not explained to us. We were simply told that if we touched that table, something would happen; and when we asked what, the reply was, 'You'll find out what!' That was your Aunt

Timothea, girls, of course. Well, Nathaniel, being a peaceful and docile child, accepted this dictum. Perhaps, knowing his aunt, he may have understood it; but I did not, and I was possessed to find out what would happen if I touched the table. Once or twice I secretly laid the tip of a finger on it, when I was alone in the room; but nothing coming of it, I decided that a stronger touch was needed to bring the 'something' to pass. There used to be a little ivory mallet that belonged to the Indian gong — ah, yes, there it is! I remember as if it were yesterday the moment when, finding myself alone in the room, I felt that my opportunity had come. I caught up the mallet and gave a sounding bang on the sacred mahogany; then waited to see what would happen. Then Miss Timothea came in, and I found out. She did it with a slipper, and I spent most of the next week standing up."

"Our Aunt Timothea Darracott was the

guardian of our childhood," Miss Phœbe explained to Mrs. Bliss. "She was an austere, but exemplary person. We derived great benefit from her ministrations, which were most devoted. A well-behaved child had little to fear from Aunt Timothea."

"You must not give our friends a false impression of James's childhood, Sister Phœbe," said Miss Vesta, looking up with the expression of a valorous dove. "He was far from being an unruly child as a general thing, though of course it was a pity about the table."

"Thank you, Vesta!" said Doctor Stedman. "But I am afraid I often got Nat into mischief. Do you remember your Uncle Tree's spankstick, Phœbe?"

"Shall we perhaps change the subject?" said Miss Phœbe, with bland severity. "It is hardly suited to the social board. Cousin Homer, may I give you a little more of the chicken, or will you have some oysters?"

"A — it is immaterial, I am obliged to you, Cousin Phœbe," said Mr. Homer Hollopeter, looking up with the air of one suddenly awakened. "The inner man has been abundantly refreshed, I thank you."

"The inner man was making a sonnet, Phœbe, and you have cruelly interrupted him," said Doctor Stedman, not without a gleam of friendly malice.

"Not a sonnet, James, this time," said Mr. Homer, coloring. "A few lines were, I confess, shaping themselves in my mind; it is very apt to be the case, when my surroundings are so gracious — so harmonious — I may say so inspiring, as at the present moment."

He waved his hands over the table, whose general effect was of crystal and gold, cream and honey, shining on the dark mirror of the bare table.

"I agree with you, I'm sure, Mr. Hollopeter," said little Mrs. Bliss, heartily. "I

couldn't write a line of poetry to save my life, but if I could, I am sure it would be about this table, Miss Blyth. It *is* the prettiest table I ever saw, and the prettiest setting."

Miss Phœbe looked pleased.

"It is a Darracott table," she said. "My aunt, Mrs. Tree, has the mate to it. They were saved when Darracott House was burned, and naturally we value them highly. I believe they formed part of the original furnishing brought over from England by James Lysander James Darracott in 1642. It is a matter of rivalry between our good Diploma Crotty and her aunt, Mrs. Tree's domestic, as to which table is in the more perfect condition. Mrs. Tree's table has no dent in it —"

"Ah, Phœbe, I shall carry that dent to my grave with me!" said Doctor Stedman, with a twinkle in his gray eyes. "You will never forgive it, I see."

"On the contrary, James, I forgave it long ago," said Miss Phœbe, graciously. "I was about to remark that though the other table has no dent, it has a scratch, made by Jocko in his youth, which years of labor have failed to efface. To my mind, the scratch is more noticeable than the dent, though both are to be regretted. Mr. Bliss, you are eating nothing. I beg you will allow me to give you a little honey! It is made by our own bees, and I think I can conscientiously recommend it. A little cream, you will find, takes off the edge of the sweet, and makes it more palatable."

"Miss Blyth, you must not give us too many good things," said the little minister, shaking his head, but holding out his plate none the less. "Thank you! thank you! most delicious, I am sure. I only hope it is not a snare of the flesh, Miss Phœbe."

He spoke merrily, in full enjoyment of his

first spoonful of honey — not the colorless, flavorless white clover variety, but the golden-rod honey, rich and full in color and flavor He smiled as he spoke, but Miss Phœbe looked grave.

"I trust not, indeed, Mr. Bliss," she said. "It would ill become my sister and me to lay snares of any kind for your feet. I always feel, however, that milk, or cream, and honey, being as it were natural gifts of a bounteous Providence, and frequently mentioned in the Scriptures, may be partaken of in moderation without fear of over-indulgence of sinful appetites. A little more? Another pound cake, Mrs. Bliss? No? Then shall we return to the parlor?"

"You spoke of your aunt, Mrs. Tree, Miss Blyth," said Mr. Bliss, when they were seated in the pleasant, shining parlor of the Temple of Vesta, the red curtains drawn, the fire crackling its usual cordial welcome.

"She is a — a singularly interesting person. What vivacity! what readiness! what a fund of information on a variety of subjects! She put me to the blush a dozen times in a talk I had with her recently."

"Have you been able to have any serious conversation with my aunt, Mr. Bliss?" asked Miss Phœbe, with a slight indication of frost in her tone. "I should be truly rejoiced to hear that such was the case."

"A — well, perhaps not exactly serious," owned the little minister, smiling and blushing. "In fact," — here he caught his wife's eye, and checked himself — "in fact, — a — she is an extremely interesting person!" he concluded, lamely.

"Now, John, why should you stop?" cried Mrs. Bliss. "Mrs. Tree is the Miss Blyths' own aunt, and they must know her ever so much better than we do. She was just as funny as she could be, Miss Blyth. Deacon

Weight had asked Mr. Bliss to call and reason with her on spiritual matters, — 'wrestle' was what he said, but John told him he was no wrestler, — and so he went and tried; but he had hardly said a word — had you, John? — when Mrs. Tree asked him which he liked best, Shakespeare or the musical glasses — what *do* you suppose she meant, Miss Vesta? And when he said Shakespeare, of course, she began talking about Hamlet, and Macready, and Mrs. Siddons, who gave her an orange when she was a little girl, and he never got in another word, did you, John? And Deacon Weight was so put out when he heard about it! I'm gl—"

"Marietta, my love!" remonstrated Mr. Bliss, hastily, "you forget yourself. Deacon Weight is our senior deacon."

"I'm sorry, John! but Mrs. Tree *is* just as kind as she can be," the little wife went on, her eyes kindling as she spoke. "Oh! — no,

I won't tell, John; you needn't be afraid. Why, she said that if I told she would set the parrot on me, and she meant it. That bird frightens me out of my wits. But she *is* kind, and I never shall forget all she has done for us."

"I understand that you are a poet, sir," the minister said, turning to Mr. Homer Hollopeter, and evidently desirous of changing the subject. "May I ask if the sonnet is your favorite form of verse?"

Mr. Homer bridled and colored.

"A — not at present, sir," he replied, modestly. "For some years I did feel that my — a — genius, if I may call it so, moved most freely in the fetters of the sonnet; but of late I have thought it well to seek — to employ — to — a — avail myself of the various forms in which the Muse enshrines herself. It — gives, if I may so express myself, more breadth of wing; more scope; more freedom;

more" — he waved his hands — "circum-ambiency!"

His hand went with a fluttering motion to his pocket.

"I am sure, Cousin Homer," said Miss Vesta, "our friends would be glad to hear some of your poetry, if you happen to have any with you."

"Very glad," echoed Mr. and Mrs. Bliss, heartily. Doctor Stedman, after a thoughtful glance at the door, and another at the clock, — but it was only seven, — settled himself resignedly in his chair and said, "Fire away, Homer!" quite kindly.

Mr. Homer drew forth a folded paper, and gazed on the company with a pensive smile.

"I confess," he said, "the thought had occurred to me that, if so desired, I might read these few lines to the choice circle before whom — or more properly which — I find myself this evening. An episode has recently

occurred in our — a — midst, Mrs. Bliss, which is of deep interest to us Elmertonians. The return of a youth, always cherished, but — shall I say, Cousin Phœbe, a temporary estray from the — a — star-y-pointing path?"

"It is a graceful way of putting it, Cousin Homer," said Miss Phœbe, with some austerity. "I trust it may be justified. Proceed, if you please. We are all attention."

Mr. Homer unfolded his paper, and opened his lips to read; but some uneasiness seemed to strike him. He moved in his seat, as if missing something, and glanced round the room. His eye fell and rested on Miss Phœbe, sitting erect and rigid — in the rocking-chair, *his* rocking-chair! Miss Phœbe would not have rocked a quarter of an inch for a fortune; every line of her figure protested against its being supposed possible that she *could* rock in company; but there she sat, and her seat was firm as the enduring hills.

Mr. Homer sighed; pushed his chair back a little, only to find its legs wholly uncompromising — and read as follows:

"LINES ON THE RETURN OF A YOUTHFUL AND VALUED FRIEND.

"Our beloved William Jaquith
Has resolved henceforth to break with
Devious ways;
And returning to his mother
Vows he will have ne'er another
All his days.

"Husk of swine did not him nourish;
Plant of Virtue could not flourish
Far from home;
So his heart with longing burnèd,
And his feet with speed returnèd
To its dome.

"Welcome, William, to our village!
Peaceful dwèll, devoid of pillage,
Cherished son!
On her sightless steps attendant,
Wear a crown of light resplendent,
Duty done!"

There was a soft murmur of appreciation from Miss Vesta and Mrs. Bliss, followed by silence. Mr. Homer glanced anxiously at Miss Phœbe.

"I should be glad of your opinion as to the third line, Cousin Phœbe," he said. "I had it 'Satan's ways,' in my first draught, but the expression appeared strong, especially for this choice circle, so I substituted 'devious' as being more gentle, more mild, more — a" — he waved his hands — "more devoid of elements likely to produce discord in the mind."

"Quite so, Cousin Homer!" replied Miss Phœbe, with a stately bend of her head. "I congratulate you upon the alteration. Satan has no place in an Elmerton parlor, especially when honored by the presence of its pastor."

CHAPTER IX.

A GARDEN PARTY

It was a golden morning in mid-October; one of those mornings when Summer seems to turn in her footsteps, and come back to search for something she had left behind. Wherever one looked was gold: gold of maple and elm leaves, gold of late-lingering flowers, gold of close-shorn fields. Over and in and through it all, airy gold of quivering, dancing sunbeams.

No spot in all Elmerton was brighter than Mrs. Tree's garden, which took the morning sun full in the face. Here were plenty of flowers still, marigolds, coreopsis, and chrysanthemums, all drinking in the sun-gold and giving it out again, till the whole place quivered with light and warmth.

"'CAREFUL WITH THAT BRIDE BLUSH, WILLY.'"

Mrs. Tree, clad in an antique fur-trimmed pelisse, with an amazing garden hat surmounting her cap, sat in a hooded wicker chair on the porch talking to William Jaquith, who was tying up roses and covering them with straw.

"Yes; such things mostly go crisscross," she was saying. "Careful with that Bride Blush, Willy; that young scamp of a Geoffrey Strong gave it to me, and I suppose I shall have to tend it the rest of my days. Humph! pity you didn't know him; he might have done something for that cough. He got the girl he wanted, but more often they don't. Look at James Stedman! and there's Homer Hollopeter has been in love with Mary Ashton ever since he was in petticoats."

"With Mary — do you mean my mother?" said Jaquith, looking up.

"She wasn't your mother when he began!" said the old lady, tartly. "He couldn't foresee

that she was going to be, could he? If he had he might have asked your permission. She preferred George Jaquith, naturally. Women mostly prefer a handsome scamp. Not that Homer ever looked like anything but a sheep. Then there was Lily Bent — "

She broke off suddenly. "You're tying that all crooked, Will Jaquith. I'll come and do it myself if you can't do better than that."

"I'll have it right in a moment, Mrs. Tree. You were saying — something about Lily Bent?"

"There are half a dozen lilies bent almost double!" Mrs. Tree declared, peevishly. "Careless! I paid five dollars for that Golden Lily, young man, and you handle it as if it were a yellow turnip."

"Mrs. Tree!"

"Well, what is it? It's time for me to have my nap, I expect."

"Mrs. Tree," — the young man's voice was

earnest and pleading, — "I brought you a letter from Lily Bent this morning. I have been waiting — I want to hear something about her. I know she has been an angel of tenderness and goodness to my mother ever since — why does she stay away so long?"

"Because she's having a good time, I suppose," said Mrs. Tree, dryly. "She's been tied close enough these last three years, what with her grandmother and — one thing and another. The old woman's dead now, and small loss. Everybody's dead, I believe, except me and a parcel of silly children. I forget what you said became of that — of your wife after she left you."

"She died," said Jaquith, abstractedly. "Didn't I tell you? They went South, and she took yellow fever. It was only a month after — "

"No, you did not!" cried Mrs. Tree, sitting bolt upright. "You never told me a word,

Willy Jaquith. What Providence was thinking of when it made this generation, passes me to conceive. If I couldn't make a better one out of fish-glue and calico, I'd give up. Bah! I've no patience with you."

She struck her stick sharply on the floor, and her little hands trembled.

"I am sorry we don't amount to more," said Jaquith, smiling, "But — I think my glue is hardening, Mrs. Tree. Tell me where Lily Bent is, that's a dear good soul, and why she stays away so long."

"I can't!" cried the old woman, and she wrung her hands. "I cannot, Willy."

"You cannot, and my mother will not," repeated William Jaquith, slowly. "And there is no one else I can or will ask. Why can you not tell me, Mrs. Tree? I think you have no right to refuse me so much information."

"Because I promised not to tell you!" cried

Mrs. Tree. "There! don't speak to me, or I shall go into a caniption! If I had known, I never would have promised. I never made a promise yet that I wasn't sorry for. Dear me, Sirs! I wonder if ever anybody was so pestered as I am.

"There! there's James Stedman. Call him over here! and don't you speak a word to me, Willy Jaquith, but finish those plants, if you are ever going to."

Obeying Jaquith's hail, Doctor Stedman, who had been for passing with a bow and a wave of the hand, turned and came up the garden walk.

"Good morning, James Stedman," said Mrs. Tree. "You haven't been near me for a month. I might be dead and buried twenty times over for all you know or care about me. A pretty kind of doctor you are!"

"What do you want of me, Mrs. Tree?" asked Doctor Stedman, laughing, and shaking

the little brown hand held out to him. "I'll come once a week, if you don't take care, and then what would you say? What do you want of me, my lady?"

"I don't want my bones crushed, just for the sake of giving you the job of mending them," said the old lady. "I'd as lief shake paws with a grizzly bear. You are getting to look rather like one, my poor James. I've always told you that if you would only shave, you might have a better chance — but never mind about that now. You were wanting to know where Lily Bent was."

"Was I?" said Doctor Stedman, wondering. "Lily Bent! why, I haven't — "

"Yes, you have," said Mrs. Tree, sharply. "Or if you haven't, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. She is staying with George Greenwell's folks, over at Parsonsbridge; his wife was her father's sister, a wall-eyed woman with crockery teeth. George Greenwell, Parsons-

bridge, do you hear? There! now I must go and take my nap, and plague take everybody, I say. Good morning to you!"

Rising from her seat with amazing celerity, she whisked into the house before Doctor Stedman's astonished eyes, and closed the door smartly after her.

With a low whistle, Doctor Stedman turned to William Jaquith.

"Our old friend seems agitated," he said. "What has happened to distress her?"

Jaquith made no reply. He was tying up a rosebush with shaking fingers, and his usually pale face was flushed, perhaps with exertion.

Doctor Stedman's bushy eyebrows came together.

"Hum!" he said, half aloud. "Lily Bent! why, — ha! yes. How is your mother, Will? I have not seen her for some time."

"She's very well, thank you, sir!" said Will

Jaquith, hurrying on his coat, and gathering up his gardening tools. "If you will excuse me, Doctor Stedman, I must get back to the office; Mr. Homer will be looking for me; he gave me this hour off, to see to Mrs. Tree's roses. Good day."

"Now, what is going on here?" said James Stedman to himself, as, still standing on the porch, he watched the young man going off down the street with long strides. "The air is full of mystery — and prickles. And why is Lily Bent — pretty creature! Why, I haven't seen her since I came back, haven't laid eyes on her! Why is she brought into it? H'm! let me see! Wasn't there a boy and girl attachment between her and Willy Jaquith? To be sure there was! I can see them now going to school together, he carrying her satchel. Then — she had a long bout of slow fever, I remember. Pottle attended her, and it's a wonder — h'm! But wasn't that about

the time when that little witch, Ada Vere, came here, and turned both the boys' heads, and carried off poor Willy, and half broke Arthur's heart? H'm! Well, I don't know what I can do about it. Hum! pretty it all looks here! If there isn't the strawberry bush, grown out of all knowledge! We were big children, Vesta and I, before we gave up hoping that it would bear strawberries. How we used to play here!"

His eyes wandered about the pleasant place, resting with friendly recognition on every knotty shrub and ancient vine.

"The snowball is grown a great tree. How long is it since I have really been in this garden? Passing through in a hurry, one doesn't see things. That must be the rose-flowered hawthorn. My dear little Vesta! I can see her now with the wreath I made for her one day. She was a little pink rose then under the rosy wreath; now she is a white one, but

more a rose than ever. Whom have we here?"

A wagon had drawn up by the garden gate with two sleepy white horses. A brown, white-bearded face was turned toward the doctor.

"Hello, doc'," said a cheery voice. "I want to know if that's you!"

"Nobody else, Mr. Butters! What is the good word with you? Are you coming in, or shall I —"

But Mr. Ithuriel Butters was already clambering down from his seat, and now came up the garden walk carrying a parcel in his hand. An old man of patriarchal height and build, with hair and beard to match. Dress him in flowing robes or in armor of brass and you would have had Abraham or a chief of the Maccabees, "'cordin' to," as he would have said. As it was, he was Old Man Butters of the Butterses Lane Ro'd, Shellback.

He gave Doctor Stedman a mighty grip, and surveyed him with friendly eyes.

"Wal, you've been in furrin parts sence I see ye. I expected you'd come back some kind of outlandishman, but I don't see but you look as nat'ral as nails in a door. Ben all over, hey? Seen the hull consarn?"

"Pretty near, Mr. Butters; I saw all I could hold, anyhow."

"See anything to beat the State of Maine?"

"I think not. No, certainly not."

"Take fall weather in the State of Maine," said Mr. Butters, slowly, his eyes roving about the sunlit garden; "take it when it's good — when it *is* good — it's *good*, sometimes! Not but what I've thought myself I should like to see furrin parts before I go. Don't want to appear ignorant where I'm goin' you understand. Mis' Tree to home, I presume likely?"

"Yes, she is at home, Mr. Butters, but I have

an idea she is lying down just now. Perhaps in half an hour — "

"Nothing of the sort!" said a voice like the click of castanets; and here was Mrs. Tree again, pelisse, hat, stick, and all. Doctor Stedman stared.

"How do you do, Ithuriel?" said Mrs. Tree, in a friendly tone, "I am glad to see you. Sit down on the bench! You may sit down too, James, if you like. What brings you in to-day, Ithuriel?"

"I brought some apples in for Blyths's folks," said Mr. Butters. "And I brought you a present, Mis' Tree."

He untied his parcel, and produced a pair of large snowy wings.

"I ben killin' some gooses lately," he explained. "The woman allers meant to send you in a pair o' wings for dusters, but she never got round to it, so I thought I'd fetch 'em in now. They're kind o' handy round a fireplace."

The wings were graciously accepted and praised.

"I was sorry to hear of your wife's death, Ithuriel," said Mrs. Tree. "I am told she was a most excellent woman."

"Yes'm, she was!" said Mr. Butters, soberly. "She was a good woman and a smart one. Pleasant to live with, too, which they ain't all. Yes, I met with a loss surely in Loviny."

"Was it sudden?"

"P'ralsis! She only lived two days after she was called, and I was glad, for she'd lost her speech, and no woman can stand that. She knowed things, you understand, she knowed things, but she couldn't free her mind. 'Loviny,' I says, 'if you know me,' I says, 'jam my hand!' She jammed it, but she never spoke. Yes'm, 'twas a visitation. I dono as I shall git me another now."

"Well, I should hope not, Ithuriel Butters!" said Mrs. Tree, with some asperity. "Why,

you are nearly as old as I am, you ridiculous creature, and you have had three wives already. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Wal, I dono as I be, Mis' Tree," said Mr. Butters, sturdily. "Age goes by feelin's, 'pears to me, more'n by Family Bibles. Take the Bible, and you'd think mebbe I warn't so young as some; but take the way I feel — why, I'm as spry as any man of sixty I know, and spryer than most of 'em. I like the merried state, and it suits me. Men-folks is like pickles, some; women-folks is the brine they're pickled in; they don't keep sweet without 'em. Besides, it's terrible lon'some on a farm, now I tell ye, with none but hired help, and them so poor you can't tell 'em from the broomstick hardly, except for their eatin'."

"Where is your stepdaughter? I thought she lived with you."

"Alviry? She's merried!" Mr. Butters threw his head back with a huge laugh.

"Ain't you heerd about Alviry's gittin' merried, Mis' Tree? Wal, wal!"

He settled back in his seat, and the light of the story-teller came into his eyes.

"I expect I'll have to tell you about that. 'Bout six weeks ago — two months maybe it was — a man come to the door — back door — and knocked. Alviry peeked through the kitchen winder, — she's terrible skeert of tramps, — and she see 'twas a decent-appearin' man, so she went to the door.

"'Miss Alviry Wilcox to home?' says he.

"'You see her before ye!' says Alviry, speakin' kind o' short.

"'I want to know!' says he. 'I was lookin' for a housekeeper, and you was named,' he says, 'so I thought I'd come out and see ye.'

"She questioned him, — Alviry's a master hand at questionin', — and he said he was a farmer livin' down East Parsonsbridge way; a

hundred acres, and a wood-lot, and six cows, and I dono what all. Wal, Alviry's ben kind o' uneasy, and lookin' for a change, for quite a spell back. I suspicioned she'd be movin' on, fust chance she got. I s'pose she thought mebbe Parsonsbridge butter would churn easier than Shellback; I dono. Anyhow, she said mebbe she'd try it for a spell, and he might expect her next week. Wal, sir,— ma'am, I ask your pardon,— he'd got his answer, and yet he didn't seem ready to go. He kind o' shuffled his feet, Alviry said, and stood round, and passed remarks on the weather and sich; and she was jest goin' to say she must git back to her ironin', when he hums and haws, and says he: 'I dono but 'twould be full as easy if we was to git merried. I'm a single man, and a good character. If you've no objections, we might fix it up that way,' he says.

"Wal! Alviry was took aback some at that,

and she said she'd have to consider of it, and ask my advice and all. 'Why, land sake!' she says, 'I don't know what your name is,' she says, 'let alone marryin' of ye.'

"So he told her his name, — Job Weezer it was; I know his folks; he *has* got a woodlot, I guess he's all right, — and she said if he'd come back next day she'd give him his answer. Wal, sir, — ma'am, *I* should say, — when I come in from milkin' she told me. I laughed till I surely thought I'd shake to pieces; and Alviry sittin' there, as sober as a jedge, not able to see what in time I was laughin' at.

"Wal, all about it was, he come back next day, and she said yes; and they was merried in a week's time by Elder Tyson, and off they went. I believe they're doin' well, and both parties satisfied; but if it ain't the beat of anything ever I see!"

"It is quite scandalous, if that is what you

mean!" said Mrs. Tree. "I never heard of such heathen doings."

"That ain't the p'int!" said Mr. Butters, chuckling. "They ain't no spring goslin's, neither one on 'em; old enough to know their own minds. What gits me is, what he see in Alviry!"

CHAPTER X.

MR. BUTTERS DISCOURSES

After leaving Mrs. Tree's house, Mr. Ithuriel Butters drove slowly along the village street toward the post-office. He jerked the reins loosely once or twice, but for the most part let the horses take their own way; he seemed absorbed in thought, and now and then he shook his head and muttered to himself, his bright blue eyes twinkling, the humorous lines of his strong old face deepening into smiling furrows. Passing the Temple of Vesta, he looked up sharply at the windows, seemed half inclined to check his horses; but no one was to be seen, and he let them take their sleepy way onward.

"I d'no as 'twould be best," he said to himself. "Diplomy's a fine woman, I wouldn't ask to see a finer; but there, I d'no how 'tis. When you've had pie you don't hanker after puddin', even when it's good puddin'; and Loviny was pie; yes, sir! she was, no mistake; mince, and no temperance mince neither. Guess I'll get along someways the rest of the time. Seems as if some of Alviry's talk must have got lodged in the cracks or somewhere; there's ben enough of it these three months. Mebbe that'll last me through. Git ap, you!"

Arrived at the post-office, Mr. Butters quitted his perch once more, and with a word to the old horses (which they did not hear, being already asleep) made his way into the outer room. Seth Weaver, who was leaning on the ledge of the delivery window, turned and greeted the old man cordially.

"Well, Uncle Ithe, how goes it?"

"H'are ye, Seth?" replied Mr. Butters,

"How's the folks? Mornin', Homer! anything for out our way? How's Mother gettin' on, Seth?"

"She's slim," replied his nephew, "real slim, Mother is. She's ben doctorin' right along, too, but it don't seem to help her any. I'm goin' to get her some new stuff this mornin' that she heard of somewhere."

"Help her? No, nor it ain't goin' to help her," said Mr. Butters, with some heat; "it's goin' to hender her. Parcel o' fools! She's taken enough physic now to pison a four-year-old gander. Don't you get her no more!"

"Wal," said Weaver, easily, "I dono as it really henders her any, Uncle Ithe; and it takes up her mind, gives her something to think about. She doctored Father so long, you know, and she's used to messin' with roots and herbs; and now her sight's failin', I tell ye, come medicine time, she brightens up and goes for it same as if it was new cider. I

don't know as I feel like denyin' her a portion o' physic, seein' she appears to crave it. She thought this sounded like good searchin' medicine, too. Them as told her about it said you feel it all through you."

"I should think you would!" retorted Mr. Butters. "So you would a quart of turpentine if you took and swallered it."

"Wal, I don't know what else *to* do, that's the fact!" Weaver admitted. "Mother's slim, I tell ye. I do gredge seein' her grouchin' round, smart a woman as she's ben."

"You make me think of Sile Stover, out our way," said Mr. Butters. "He sets up to be a hoss doctor, ye know; hosses and stock gen'lly. Last week he called me in to see a hog that was failin' up. Said he'd done all he could do, and the critter didn't seem to be gettin' no better, and what did I advise?

"'What have ye done?' says I.

"'Wal,' says he, 'I've cut his tail, and

drawed two of his teeth, and I dono what else *to* do,' he says. Hoss doctor! A clo'es-hoss is the only kind he knows much about, I calc'late."

"Wasn't he the man that tried to cure Peckham's cow of the horn ail, bored a hole in her horn and put in salt and pepper, — or was it oil and vinegar?"

Mr. Butters nodded. "Same man! Now that kind of a man will always find folks enough to listen to him and take up his dum notions. I tell ye what it is! You can have drought, and you can have caterpillars, and you can have frost. You can lose your hay crop, and your apple crop, and your potato crop; but there's one crop there can't nothin' touch, and that's the fool crop. You can count on that, sartin as sin. I tell ye, Seth, don't you fill your mother up with none of that pison stuff. She's a good woman, if she did marry a Weaver."

Seth's eyes twinkled. "Well, Uncle Ithe,

seein' you take it so hard," he said, "I don't mind tellin' you that I'd kind o' thought the matter out for myself; and it 'peared to me that a half a pint o' molasses stirred up with a gre't spoonful o' mustard and a small one of red pepper would look about the same, and taste jest as bad, and wouldn't do her a mite of harm. I ain't all Weaver now, be I?"

Uncle and nephew exchanged a sympathetic chuckle. At this moment Mr. Homer's meek head appeared at the window.

"There are no letters for you to-day, Mr. Butters," he said, deprecatingly; "but here is one for Miss Leora Pitcher; she is in your neighborhood, I believe?"

"Wal, depends upon what you call neighborhood," Mr. Butters replied. "It's two miles by the medders, and four by the ro'd."

"Oh!" said Mr. Homer, still more deprecatingly; "I was not aware that the distance was so considerable, Mr. Butters. I conceived that

Miss Pitcher's estate and yours were — adjacent; — a — contiguous; — a — in point of fact, near together."

"Wal, they ain't," said Mr. Butters; "but if it's anyways important, mebbe I could fetch a compass round that way."

"I should be truly grateful if you could do so, Mr. Butters!" said Mr. Homer, eagerly. "I — I feel as if this letter might be of importance, I confess. Miss Pitcher has sent in several times by various neighbors, and I have felt an underlying anxiety in her inquiries. I was rejoiced this morning when the expected letter came. It is — a — in a masculine hand, you will perceive, Mr. Butters, and the postmark is that of the town to which Miss Pitcher's own letters were sent. I do not wish to seem indelicately intrusive, but I confess it has occurred to me that this might be a case of possible misunderstanding; of — a — alienation; of — a — wounding of the tendrils of

the heart, gentlemen. To see a young person, especially a young lady, suffer the pangs of hope deferred — "

Ithuriel Butters looked at him.

"Have you ever seen Leory Pitcher, Homer?" he asked, abruptly.

"No, sir, I have not had that pleasure. But from the character of her handwriting (she has the praiseworthy habit of putting her own name on the envelope), I have inferred her youth, and a certain timidity of — "

"Wal, she's sixty-five, if she's a day, and she's got a hare-lip and a cock-eye. She's uglier than sin, and snugger than eel-skin; one o' them kind that when you prick 'em they bleed sour milk; and what she wants is for her brother-in-law to send her his wife's clo'es, 'cause he's goin' to marry again. All Shellback's ben talkin' about it these three months."

Mr. Homer colored painfully.

"Is it so?" he said, dejectedly. "I regret that — that my misconception was so complete. I ask your pardon, Mr. Butters."

"Nothin' at all, nothin' at all," said Mr. Butters, briskly, seeing that he had given pain. "You mustn't think I want to say anything against a neighbor, Homer, but there's no paintin' Leory Pitcher pooty, 'cause she ain't.

"I ben visitin' with Mis' Tree this mornin'," he added, benevolently; "she's aunt to you, I believe, ain't she?"

"Cousin, Mr. Butters," said Mr. Homer, still depressed. "Mrs. Tree and my father were first cousins. A most interesting character, my cousin Marcia, Mr. Butters.

"Wal, she is so," responded Mr. Butters, heartily. "She certinly is; ben so all her life. Why, sir, I knew Mis' Tree when she was a gal."

"Sho!" said Seth Weaver, incredulously.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Homer, with interest.

"Yes, sir, I knew her well. She was older than me, some. When I was a boy, say twelve year old, Miss Marshy Darracott was a young lady. The pick of the country she was, now I tell ye! Some thought Miss Timothy was handsomer, — she was tall, and a fine figger; her and Mis' Blyth favored each other, — but little Miss Marshy was the one for my money. She used to make me think of a hummin'-bird; quick as a flash, here, and there, gone in a minute, and back again before you could wink. She had a little black mare she used to ride, Firefly, she called her. Eigh, sirs, to see them two kitin' round the country was a sight, now I tell ye. I recall one day I was out in the medder behind Darracott House — you know that gully that runs the len'th of the ten-acre lot? Well, there used to be a bridge over that gully, just a foot-

bridge it was, little light thing, push it over with your hand, seemed as if you could. Wal, sir, I was pokin' about the way boys do, huntin' for box-plums, or woodchucks, or nothin' at all, when all of a suddin I heard hoofs and voices, and I slunk in behind a tree, bein' diffident, and scairt of bein' so near the big house.

"Next minute they come out into the ro'd, two on 'em, Miss Marshy Darracott and George Tennaker, Squire Tennaker's son, over to Bascom. He was a big, red-faced feller, none too well thought of, for all his folks had ben in the country as long as the Darracotts, or the Butterses either, for that matter, and he'd ben hangin' round Miss Marshy quite a spell, though she wouldn't have nothin' to say to him. I was in her Sabbath-school class, and thought the hull world of her, this one and a piece of the next; and I gredged George Tennaker so much as lookin' at her.

Wal, they come along, and he was sayin' something, and she answered him short and sharp; I can see her now, her eyes like black di'monds, and the red comin' and goin' in her cheeks: she was a pictur if ever I seed one. Pooty soon he reached out and co't holt of her bridle. Gre't Isrel, sir! she brought down her whip like a stroke of lightning on his fingers, and he dropped the rein as if it burnt him. Then she whisked round, and across that bridge quicker'n any swaller ever you see. It shook like a poplar-tree, but it hadn't no time to fall if it wanted to; she was acrost, and away out of sight before you could say 'Simon Peter;' and he set there in the ro'd cussin', and swearin', and suckin' his fingers. I tell ye, I didn't need no dinner that day; I was full up, and good victuals, too."

"This is extremely interesting, Mr. Butters," said Mr. Homer. "You — a — you present my venerable relative in a wholly new light.

She is so — a — so extremely venerable, if I may so express myself, that I confess I have never before had an accurate conception of her youth."

"You thought old folks was born old," said Mr. Butters, with a chuckle. "Wal, they warn't. They was jest as young as young folks, and oftentimes younger. Miss Marshy warn't no more than a slip of a girl when she merried. Come along young Cap'n Tree, jest got his first ship, and the world in his pants pocket, and said 'Snip!' and she warn't backward with her 'Snap!' I tell ye. Gorry! they were a handsome pair. See 'em come along the street, you knowed how 'twas meant man and woman should look. For all she was small, Mis' Tree would ha' spread out over a dozen other women, the sperit she had in her; and he was tall enough for both, the cap'n would say. And proud of each other! He'd have laid down gold bricks for her to

walk on if he'd had his way. Yes, sir, 'twas a sight to see 'em.

"There ain't no such young folks nowadays; not but what that young Strong fellow was well enough; he got a nice gal, too. Wal, sir, this won't thresh the oats. I must be gettin' along. Think mebbe there ain't no sech hurry about that letter for Leory Pitcher, do ye, Homer? I'll kerry it if you say so."

"I thank you, Mr. Butters," said Mr. Homer, sadly, "it is immaterial, I am obliged to you."

CHAPTER XI.

MISS PHŒBE PASSES ON

Miss Phœbe Blyth's death came like a bolt from a clear sky. The rheumatism, which had for so many years been her companion, struck suddenly at her heart. A few hours of anguish, and the stout heart had ceased to beat, the stern yet kindly spirit was gone on its way.

Great was the grief in the village. If not beloved as Miss Vesta was, Miss Phœbe was venerated by all, as a woman of austere and exalted piety and of sterling goodness. All Elmerton went to her funeral, on a clear October day not unlike Miss Phœbe herself, bright, yet touched with wholesome frost. All Elmerton went about the rest of the day with

hushed voice and sober brow, looking up at the closed shutters of the Temple of Vesta, and wondering how it fared with the gentle priestess, now left alone. The shutters were white and fluted, and being closed, heightened the effect of clean linen which the house always presented — linen starched to the point of perfection, with a dignified frill, but no frivolity of lace or trimming.

"I do declare," said Miss Penny Pardon, telling her sister about it all, "the house looked so like Miss Blyth herself, I expected to hear it say, 'Pray step in and be seated!' just like she used to. Elegant manners Miss Blyth had; and she walked elegant, too, in spite of her rheumatiz. When I see her go past up the street, I always said, 'There goes a lady, let the next be who she will!'"

"Yes," said Miss Prudence, with a sigh; "if Phœbe Blyth had but dressed as she might

there's no one in Elmerton could have stood beside her for style. I've told her so, time and again, but she never would hear a word. She was peculiar."

"There! I expect we're all peculiar, sister, one way or another," said Miss Penny, soothingly. This matter of the Blyth girls' dressing was Miss Prudence's great grievance, and just now it was heightened by circumstances.

"Miss Blyth's mind was above clothes, I expect, Prudence," Miss Penny continued. "'Twa'n't that she hadn't every confidence in you, for I've heard her speak real handsome of your method."

"A person's mind has no call to be above clothes," said Miss Prudence, with some asperity. "They are all that stands between us and savages, some think. But I've no wish to cast reflections this day. Miss Blyth was a fine woman, and she is a great loss to this village. But I *do* say she was peculiar, and I'll stand

to that with my dying breath ; and I do think Vesta shows a want of — "

She stopped abruptly. The shop-bell rang, and Mrs. Weight entered, crimson and panting. She hurried across the shop, and entered the sewing-room before Miss Penny could go to meet her.

"Well," she said, "here I am! How do you do, Prudence? You look re'l poorly. Girls, I've come straight to you. I'm not one to pass by on the other side, never was. I like to sift a thing to the bottom, and get the rights of it. I'm not one to spread abroad, but when I do speak, I desire to speak the truth, and for that truth I have come to you."

She paused, and fixed a solemn gaze on the two sisters.

"You'll get it!" said Miss Prudence, a steely glitter coming into her gray eyes. "We ain't in the habit of tellin' lies here, as I know of. What do you want?"

"I want to know if it's true that Vesta Blyth isn't going to wear mourning for her sole and only sister. I want to know if it's *so!* You could have knocked me down with a broom-straw when I see her settin' there in her gray silk dress, for all the world as if we'd come to sewin'-circle instead of a funeral. I don't know when I have had such a turn; I was palpitating all through the prayer. Now I want you to tell me just how 'tis, girls, for, of course, you know — unless she sent over to Cyrus for her things, and they been delayed. I shouldn't hardly have thought she'd have done that, though some say that new dressmaker over there has all the styles straight from New York. What say?"

"I don't know as I've said anything yet," said Miss Prudence, with ominous calm. "I don't know as I've had a chance. But it's true that Miss Vesta Blyth don't intend to put on mourning."

"Well, I —"

For once, words seemed to fail Mrs. Weight, and she gaped upon her hearers open-mouthed; but speech returned quickly.

"Girls, I would *not* have believed it, not unless I had seen it with these eyes. Even so, I supposed most likely there had been some delay. I asked Mis' Tree as we were comin' out — she spoke pleasant to me for once in her life, and I knew she must be thinkin' of her own end, and I wanted to say something, so I says, 'Vesta ain't got her mournin' yet, has she, Mis' Tree?'

"She looked at me jest her own way, her eyes kind o' sharpenin' up, and says, 'Neither has the Emperor of Morocco! Isn't it a calamity?'

"I dono what she meant, unless 'twas to give me an idee what high connections they had, though it ain't likely there's anything of that sort; I never heerd of any furrin blood

in either family: but I see 'twas no use tryin' to get anything out of her, so I come straight to you. And here you tell me — what does it mean, Prudence Pardon? Are we in a Christian country, I want to know, or are we not?"

Miss Prudence knit her brows behind her spectacles. "I don't know, sometimes, whether we are in a Christian country or whether we ain't," she said, grimly. "Miss Phœbe Blyth didn't approve of mourning, on religious grounds; and Miss Vesta feels it right to carry out her sister's views. That's all there is to it, I expect; I expect it's their business, too, and not other folks'."

"Miss Phœbe thought mournin' wa'n't a Christian custom," said Miss Penny. "I've heard her say so; and that 'twas payin' too much respect to the perishin' flesh. We don't feel that way, Sister an' me, but them was her views, and she was a consistent, practical Christian, if ever I see one. I don't think it

strange, for my part, that Miss Vesta should wish to do as was desired, though very likely her own feelin's may have ben different. She would be a perfect pictur' in a bunnet and veil, though I dono as she could look any prettier than what she did to-day."

"If I could have the dressin' of Vesta Blyth as she should be dressed," said Miss Prudence, solemnly, "there's no one in this village — I'll go further, and say county — that could touch her. She hasn't the style of Phœbe, but — there! there's like a light round her when she moves; I don't know how else to put it. It's like stickin' the scissors into me every time I cut them low shoulders for her. I always did despise a low shoulder, long before I ever thought I should be cuttin' of 'em."

"Well, girls," said Mrs. Weight, "you may make the best of it, and it's handsome in you, I will say, Prudence, for of course you naturally looked to have the cuttin', and I sup-

pose all dressmakers get something extry for mournin', seein' it's a necessity, or is thought so by most Christian people. But I am the wife of the senior deacon of the parish wherein she sits, and I feel a call to speak to Vesta Blyth before I sleep this night. Our pastor's wife is young, and though I am aware she means well, she hasn't the stren'th nor yet the faculty to deal with folks as is older than herself on spiritual matters; so I feel it laid upon me —"

"I thought it was clothes you was talkin' about," said Miss Prudence, and she closed her scissors with a snap. "I hope you'll excuse me, Mis' Weight, but you speakin' to Vesta Blyth about spiritual matters seems to me jest a leetle mite like a hen teachin' a swallow to fly."

While this talk was going on, little Miss Vesta, in her gray gown and white kerchief,

was moving softly about the lower rooms of the Temple of Vesta, setting the chairs in their accustomed places, passing a silk cloth across their backs in case of finger-marks, looking anxiously for specks of dust on the shining tables and whatnots, putting fresh flowers in the vases. Some well-meaning but uncomprehending friends had sent so-called "funeral flowers," purple and white; to these Miss Vesta added every glory of yellow, every blaze of lingering scarlet, that the garden afforded. She threw open the shutters, and let the afternoon sun stream into the darkened rooms.

Diploma Crotty, standing in a corner, her hands folded in her apron, her eyes swollen with weeping, watched with growing anxiety the slight figure that seemed to waver as it moved from very fatigue.

"That strong light'll hurt your eyes, Miss Blyth," she said, presently. "You go and lay down, and I'll bring you a cup of tea."

"No, I thank you, Diploma," said Miss Vesta, quietly; and she added, with a soft hurry in her voice, "And if you would please not to call me Miss Blyth, my good Diploma, I should be grateful to you. Say 'Miss Vesta,'" as usual, if you please. I desire — let us keep things as they have been — as they have been. My beloved sister has gone away" — the soft even voice quivered, but did not break — "gone away, but not far. I am sure I need not ask you, Diploma, to help me in keeping everything as my dear sister would like best to have it. You know so well about almost every particular; but — she preferred to have the tidies straight, not cornerwise. You will not feel hurt, I am sure, if I alter them. They are beautifully done up, Diploma; it would be a real pleasure to my dear sister to see them."

"I knew they were on wrong," said the handmaid, proceeding to aid in changing the position of the delicate crocheted squares.

"Mis' Bliss wanted to do something to help, — she's real good, — and I had them just done up, and thought she couldn't do much harm with 'em. There! I knew Deacon Weight wouldn't rest easy till he got his down under him. He's got it all scrunched up, settin' on it. It doos beat all how that man routs round in his cheer."

"Hush, Diploma! I must ask you not to speak so," said Miss Vesta. "Deacon Weight is an officer of the church. I fear he may have chosen a chair not sufficiently ample for his person. There, that will do nicely! Now I think the room looks quite as my dear sister would wish to see it. Does it not seem so to you, Diploma?"

"The room's all right," said Diploma, gruffly; "but if Miss Blyth was here, she'd tell you to go and lay down this minute, Miss Vesty, and so I bid you do. You're as white and scrunched as that tidy. No wonder, after

settin' up these two nights, and all you've ben through. I wish to goodness Doctor Strong had ben here; he'd have made you get a nurse, whether or whethern't. Doctor Stedman ain't got half the say-so to him that Doctor Strong has."

"You are mistaken, Diploma!" said Miss Vesta, blushing. "Doctor Stedman spoke strongly, very strongly indeed. He was very firm on the point; indeed, he became incensed about it, but it was not a point on which I could give way. My dear sister always said that no hireling should ever touch her person, and I consider it one of my crowning mercies that I was able to care for her to the last; with your help, my dear Diploma! I could not have done it without your help. I beg you to believe how truly grateful I am to you for your devotion."

"Well, there ain't no need, goodness knows!" grumbled Diploma Crotty, "but if so you be,

you'll go and lay down now, Miss Vesty, like a good girl. There! there's Mis' Weight comin' up the steps this minute of time. I'll go and tell her you're on the bed and can't see her."

Was it Miss Vesta, gentle Miss Vesta, who answered? It might have been Miss Phœbe, with head erect and flashing eyes of displeasure.

"You will tell the simple truth, Diploma, if you please. Tell Mrs. Weight that I do not desire to see her. She should know better than to call at this house to-day on any pretence whatever. My dear sister would have been highly incensed at such a breach of propriety. I —" the fire faded, and the little figure drooped, wavered, rested for a moment on the arm of the faithful servant. "I thank you, my good Diploma. I will go and lie down now, as you thoughtfully suggest."

CHAPTER XII.

THE PEAK IN DARIEN

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken:
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

— *John Keats.*

BEHIND the yellow walls of the post-office Mr. Homer Hollopeter mourned deeply and sincerely for his cousin. The little room devoted to collecting and dispensing the United States mail, formerly a dingy and sordid den, had become, through Mr. Homer's efforts, cheerfully seconded by those of Will Jaquith, a little temple of shining neatness, where even Miss

Phœbe's or Miss Vesta's dainty feet might have trod without fear of pollution. It was more like home to Mr. Homer than the bare little room where he slept, and now that it was his own, he delighted in dusting, polishing, and cleaning, as a woman might have done. The walls were brightly whitewashed, and adorned with portraits of Keats and Shelley; on brackets in two opposite corners Homer and Shakespeare gazed at each other with mutual approval. The stove was black and glossy as an Ashantee chief, and the clock, once an unsightly mass of fly-specks and cobwebs, now showed a white front as immaculate as Mr. Homer's own. Opposite the clock hung a large photograph, in a handsome gilt frame, of a mountain peak towering alone against a clear sky.

When Mr. Homer entered the post-office the day after Miss Phœbe's funeral, he carried in his hand a fine wreath of ground pine

tied with a purple ribbon, and this wreath he proceeded to hang over the mountain picture. Will Jaquith watched him with wondering sympathy. The little gentleman's eyes were red, and his hands trembled.

"Let me help you, sir!" cried Jaquith, springing up. "Let me hang it for you, won't you?"

But Mr. Homer waved him off, gently but decidedly.

"I thank you, William, I thank you!" he said, "but I prefer to perform this action myself. It is — a tribute, sir, to an admirable woman. I wish to pay it in person; in person."

After some effort he succeeded in attaching the wreath, and, standing back, surveyed it with mournful pride.

"I think that looks well," he said. "My fingers are unaccustomed to twine any garlands save those of — a — song; but I think that looks well, William?"

"Very well, sir!" said Will, heartily. "It is a very handsome wreath; and how pretty the green looks against the gold!"

"The green is emblematic; it is the color of memory," said Mr. Homer. "This wreath, though comparatively enduring, will fade, William; will — a — wither; will — a — become dessicated in the natural process of decay; but the memory of my beloved cousin will endure, sir, in one faithful heart, while that heart continues to — beat; to — throb; to — a — palpitate."

He was silent for a few minutes, gazing at the picture; then he continued:

"I had hoped," he said, sadly, "that at some date in the near future my dear cousin would have condescended to visit our — retreat, William, and have favored it with the seal of her approval. I venture to think that she would have found its conditions improved; ameliorated — a — rendered more in accordance with

the ideal. But it was not to be, sir, it was not to be. As the lamented Keats observes, 'The Spirit mourn'd "Adieu!"' She is gone, sir; gone!"

"I have often meant to ask you, sir," said Will Jaquith, "what mountain that is. I don't seem to recognize it."

Mr. Homer was silent, his eyes still fixed on the picture. Jaquith, thinking he had not heard, repeated the question.

"I heard you, William, I heard you!" said Mr. Homer, with dignity. "I was considering what reply to make to you. That picture, sir, represents a Peak in Darien."

"Indeed!" said Will, in surprise. "Do you know its name? I did not think there were any so high as this."

Mr. Homer waved his hands with a vague gesture.

"I do not know its name!" he said, "Therefore I expressly said, *a* peak. I do not

even know that this special mountain *is* in Darien, though I consider it so; I consider it so The picture, William, is a symbolical one — to me. It represents — a — Woman."

"Woman!" repeated Jaquith, puzzled.

"Woman!" said Mr. Homer. His mild face flushed; he cleared his throat nervously, and opened and shut his mouth several times.

"I pay to-day, as I have told you, my young friend, a tribute to one admirable woman; but the Peak in Darien symbolizes — a — Woman, in general. Without Woman, sir, what, or where, should we be? Until we attain a knowledge of — a — Woman, through the medium of the — a — Passion (I speak of it with reverence!), what, or where are we? We journey over arid plains, we flounder in treacherous quagmires. Suddenly looms before us, clear against the sky, as here represented, the Peak in Darien — Woman! Guided by the — a — Passion (I speak of its

lofty phases, sir, its lofty phases!), we scale those crystal heights. It may be in fancy only; it may be that circumstances over which we have no control forbid our ever setting an actual foot on even the bases of the Peak; but this is a case in which fancy is superior to fact. In fancy, we scale those heights; and — and we stare at the Pacific, sir, and look at each other with a wild surmise — silent, sir, silent, upon a Peak in Darien!"

Mr. Homer said no more, but stood gazing at his picture, rapt in contemplation. Jaquith was silent, too, watching him, half in amusement, half — or more than half — in something not unlike reverence. Mr. Homer was not an imposing figure: his back was long, his legs were short, his hair and nose were distinctly absurd; but now, the homely face seemed transfigured, irradiated by an inward glow of feeling.

Jaquith recalled Mrs. Tree's words. Had this quaint little gentleman really been in love with his beautiful mother? Poor Mr. Homer! It was very funny, but it was pathetic, too. Poor Mr. Homer!

The young man's thoughts ran on swiftly. The Peak in Darien! Well, that was all true. Only, how if — unconsciously he spoke aloud, his eyes on the picture — "How if a man were misled for a time by — I shall have to mix my metaphors, Mr. Homer — by a will-o'-the-wisp, and fell into the quagmire, and lost sight of his mountain for a time, only to find it again, more lovely than — would he have any right to — what was it you said, sir? — to try once more to scale those crystal heights?"

"Undoubtedly he would!" said Mr. Homer Hollopeter. "Undoubtedly, if he were sure of himself, sure that no false light — I perceive the mixture of metaphors, but this can-

not always be avoided — would again fall across his path."

"He is sure of that!" said Will Jaquith, under his breath.

He had risen, and the two men were standing side by side, both intent upon the picture. Twilight was falling, but a ray of the setting sun stole through the little window, and rested upon the Peak in Darien.

"He is sure of that!" repeated William Jaquith.

When he spoke again, his voice was husky, his speech rapid and broken.

"Mr. Homer" (no one ever said "Mr. Hollopeter," nor would he have been pleased if any one had), "I have been here six months, have I not? six months to-morrow?"

"Yes, William," said Mr. Homer, turning his mild eyes on his assistant.

"Have I — have I given satisfaction, sir?"

"Eminent satisfaction!" said Mr. Homer,

cordially. "William, I have had no fault to find; none. Your punctuality, your exactness, your assiduity, leave nothing to be desired. This has been a great gratification to me — on many accounts."

"Then, you — you think I have the right to call myself a man once more; that I have the right to take up a man's life, its joys, as well as its labors?"

"I think so, most emphatically," cried the little gentleman, nodding his head. "I think you deserve the best that life has to give."

"Then — then, Mr. Homer, may I have a day off to-morrow, please? I want" — he broke into a tremulous laugh, and laid his hand on the elder man's shoulder, — "I want to climb the Peak, Mr. Homer!"

So it came to pass one day, soon after this, that as Mrs. Tree was sitting by her fire, with the parrot dozing on his perch beside her,

there came to the house two young people, who entered without knock or ring, and coming hand in hand to her side, bent down, not saying a word, and kissed her.

"Highty tighty!" cried Mrs. Tree, her eyes twinkling very brightly under a tremendous frown.

"What is the meaning of all this, I should like to know? How dare you kiss me, Willy Jaquith?"

"Old friends to love!" said Jocko, opening one yellow eye, and ruffling his feathers knowingly.

"Jocko knows how I dare!" said Will Jaquith. "Dear old friend, I will tell you what it means. It means that I have brought you another Golden Lily in place of the one you said I spoiled. You can only have her to look at, though, for she is mine, mine and my mother's, and we cannot give her up, even to you."

"I didn't exactly break my promise, Lily!" cried the old lady; her hands trembled on her stick, but her cap was erect, immovable. "I didn't tell him, but I never promised not to tell James Stedman, you know I never did."

The lovely, dark-eyed girl bent over her and kissed the withered cheek again.

"My dear! my naughty, wicked, delightful dear," she murmured, "how shall I ever forgive you — or thank you?"

CHAPTER XIII.

LIFE IN DEATH

"DRIVE to Miss Dane's!" said Mrs. Tree.

"Drive where?" asked old Anthony, pausing with one foot on the step of the ancient carryall.

"To Miss Dane's!"

"Well, I snum!" said old Anthony.

The Dane Mansion, as it was called, stood on the outskirts of the village; a gaunt, gray house, standing well back from the road, with dark hedges of Norway spruce drawn about it like a funeral scarf. The panelled wooden shutters of the front windows were never opened, and a stranger passing by would have thought the house uninhabited; but all Elmer-

ton knew that behind those darkling hedges and close shutters, somewhere in the depths of the tall many-chimneyed house, lived — "if you can call it living!" Mrs. Tree said — Miss Virginia Dane. Miss Dane was a contemporary of Mrs. Tree's, — indeed, report would have her some years older, — but she had no other point of resemblance to that lively potentate. She never left her house. None of the present generation of Elmertonians had ever seen her face; and to the rising generation, the boys and girls who passed the outer hedge, if dusk were coming on, with hurried step and quick affrighted glances, she was a kind of spectre, a living phantom of the past, probably terrible to look upon, certainly dreadful to think of. These terrors were heightened by the knowledge, diffused one hardly knew how, that Miss Dane was a spiritualist, and that in her belief at least, the silent house was peopled with departed Danes, the brothers

and sisters of whom she was the last remaining one.

Things being thus, it was perhaps not strange that old Anthony, usually the most discreet of choremen, was driven by surprise to the extent of "snumming" by the order he received. He allowed himself no further comment, however, but flecked the fat brown horse on the ear with his whip, and said "Gitty up!" with more interest than he usually manifested.

Mrs. Tree was arrayed in her India shawl, and crowned with the bird-of-paradise bonnet, from which swept an ample veil of black lace. She sat bolt upright in the carriage, her stick firmly planted in front of her, her hands crossed on its crutch handle, and her whole air was one of uncompromising energy.

"Shall I knock?" said Anthony, glancing up at the blind house-front with an expression which said plainly enough "It won't be any use.'

"No, I'm going to get out. Here, help me! the other side, ninnyhammer! You have helped me out on the wrong side for forty years, Anthony Barker; I must be a saint after all, or I never should have stood it."

The old lady mounted the granite steps briskly, and knocked smartly on the door with the top of her stick. After some delay it was opened by a grim-looking elderly woman with a forbidding squint.

"How do you do, Keziah? I am coming in. You may wait for me, Anthony."

"I don't know as Miss Dane feels up to seein' company, Mis' Tree," said the grim woman, doubtfully, holding the door in her hand.

"Folderol!" said Mrs. Tree, waving her aside with her stick. "She's in her sitting-room, I suppose. To be sure! How are you, Virginia?"

The room Mrs. Tree entered was gaunt and gray like the house itself; high-studded, with

blank walls of gray paint, and wintry gleams of marble on chimneypiece and furniture. Gaunt and gray, too, was the figure seated in the rigid high-backed chair, a tall old woman in a black gown and a close muslin cap like that worn by the Shakers, with a black ribbon bound round her forehead. Her high features showed where great beauty, of a masterful kind, had once dwelt; her sunken eyes were cold and dim as a steel mirror that has lain long buried and has forgotten how to give back the light.

These eyes now dwelt upon Mrs. Tree, with recognition, but no warmth or kindliness in their depths.

"How are you, Virginia?" repeated the visitor. "Come, shake hands! you are alive, you know, after a fashion; where's the use of pretending you are not?"

Miss Dane extended a long, cold, transparent hand, and then motioned to a seat.

"I am well, Marcia," she said, coldly. "I have been well for the past fifteen years, since we last met."

"I made the last visit, I remember," said Mrs. Tree, composedly, hooking a gray horse-hair footstool toward her with her stick, and settling her feet on it. "You gave me to understand then that I need not come again till I had something special to say, so I have stayed away."

"I have no desire for visitors," said Miss Dane. She spoke in a hollow, inward monotone, which somehow gave the impression that she was in the habit of talking to herself, or to something that made no response. "My soul is fit company for me."

"I should think it might be!" said Mrs. Tree.

"Besides, I am surrounded by the Blessed," Miss Dane went on. "This room probably appears bare and gloomy to your eyes, Marcia,

but I see it peopled by the Blessed, in troops, crowding about me, robed and crowned."

"I hope they enjoy themselves," said Mrs. Tree. "I will not interrupt you or them more than a few minutes, Virginia. I want to ask if you have made your will. A singular question, but I have my reasons for asking."

"Certainly I have; years ago."

"Have you left anything to Mary Jaquith — Mary Ashton?"

"No!" A spark crept into the dim gray eyes.

"So I supposed. Did you know that she was poor, and blind?"

There was a pause.

"I did not know that she was blind," Miss Dane said, presently. "For her poverty, she has herself to thank."

"Yes! she married the man she loved. It was a crime, I suppose. You would have had her live on here with you all her days, and turn to stone slowly."

"I brought Mary Ashton up as my own child," Miss Dane went on; and there was an echo of some past emotion in her deathly voice. "She chose to follow her own way, in defiance of my wishes, of my judgment. She sowed the wind, and she has reaped the whirlwind. We are as far apart as the dead and the living."

"Just about!" said Mrs. Tree. "Now, Virginia Dane, listen to me! I have come here to make a proposal, and when I have made it I shall go away, and that is the last you will see of me in this world, or most likely in the next. Mary Ashton married a scamp, as other women have done and will do to the end of the chapter. She paid for her mistake, poor child, and no one has ever heard a word of complaint or repining from her. She got along — somehow; and now her boy, Will, has come home, and means to be a good son, and will be one, too, and see her com-

fortable the rest of her days. But — Will wants to marry. He is engaged to Andrew Bent's daughter, a sweet, pretty girl, born and grown up while you have been sitting here in your coffin, Virginia Dane. Now — they won't take any more help from me, and I like 'em for it; and yet I want them to have more to do with. Will is clerk in the post-office, and his salary would give the three of them skim milk and red herrings, but not much more. I want you to leave them some money, Virginia."

There was a pause, during which the two pairs of eyes, the dim gray and the fiery black, looked into each other.

"This is a singular request, Marcia," said Miss Dane, at last. "I believe I have never offered you advice as to the bestowal of your property; nor, if I remember aright, is Mary Ashton related to you in any way."

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree, shortly. "Don't mount your high horse with me,

Jinny, because it won't do any good. I don't know or care anything about your property: you may leave it to the cat for aught I care. What I want is to give you some of mine to leave to William Jaquith, in case you die first."

She then made a definite proposal, to which Miss Dane listened with severe attention.

"And suppose you die first," said the latter. "What then?"

"Oh, my will is all right, I have left him money enough. But there's no more prospect of my dying than there was twenty years ago. I shall live to be a hundred."

"I also come of a long-lived family," said Miss Dane.

"I thought the Blessed might get tired of waiting, and come and fetch you," said Mrs. Tree, dryly; "besides, you haven't so far to go as I have. Seriously, one of us must in common decency go before long, Virginia; it is hardly respectable for both of us to linger

in this way. Now, if you will only listen to reason, when the time does come for either of us, Willy Jaquith is sure of comfort for the rest of his days. What do you say?"

Miss Dane was silent for some time. Finally:

"I will consider the matter," she said, coldly. "I cannot answer you at this moment, Marcia. You have broken in upon the current of my thoughts, and disturbed the peace of my soul. I will communicate with you by writing, when my decision is reached; no second interview will be necessary."

"I'm glad you think so," said Mrs. Tree, rising. "I wasn't intending to come again. You knew that Phœbe Blyth was dead?"

"I knew that Phœbe had passed out of this sphere," replied Miss Dane. "Keziah learned it from the purveyor."

She paused a moment, and then added, "Phœbe was with me last night."

"Was she?" said Mrs. Tree, grimly. "I'm sorry to hear it. Phœbe was a good woman, if she did have her faults."

"You may be glad to hear that she is in a blessed state at present," the cold monotone went on. "She came with my sisters Sophia and Persis; Timothea was also with them, and inquired for you."

"H'm!" said Mrs. Tree.

"I have no wish to rouse your animosity, Marcia," continued Miss Dane, after another pause, "and I am well aware of your condition of hardened unbelief; but we are not likely to meet again in this sphere, and since you have sought me out in my retirement, I feel bound to tell you, that I have received several visits of late from your husband, and that he is more than ever concerned about your spiritual welfare. If you wish it, I will repeat to you what he said."

The years fell away from Marcia Darra-

cott like a cloak. She made two quick steps forward, her little hands clenched, her tiny figure towering like a flame.

"*You dare* — " she said, then stopped abruptly. The blaze died down, and the twinkle came instead into her bright eyes. She laughed her little rustling laugh, and turned to go. "Good-by, Jinny," she said; "you don't mean to be funny, but you are. Ethan Tree is in heaven; but if you think he would come back from the pit to see you — te hee! Good-by, Jinny Dane!"

Mrs. Tree sat bolt upright again all the way home, and chuckled several times.

"Now, that woman's jealousy is such," she said, aloud, "that, rather than have me do for her niece, she'll leave her half her fortune and die next week, just to spite me." (In point of fact, this prophecy came almost literally to pass, not a week, but a month later.)

"Yes, Anthony, a very pleasant call,

thank ye. Help me out; *the other side*, old step-and-fetch-it! I believe you were a hundred years old when I was born. Yes, that's all. Direxia, Hawkes, give him a cup of coffee; he's got chilled waiting in the cold. No, I'm warm enough; I had something to warm me."

In spite of this last declaration, when little Mrs. Bliss came in half an hour later to see the old lady, she found her with her feet on the fender, sipping hot mulled wine, and declaring that the marrow was frozen in her bones.

"I have been sitting in a tomb," she said, in answer to the visitor's alarmed inquiries, "talking to a corpse. Did you ever see Virginia Dane?"

Mrs. Bliss opened her blue eyes wide. "Oh, no, Mrs. Tree. I didn't know that any one ever saw Miss Dane. I thought she was —"

"She is dead," said Mrs. Tree. "I have

been talking with her corpse, I tell you, and I don't like corpses. You are alive and warm, and I like you. Tell me some scandal."

"Oh, Mrs. Tree!"

"Well, tell me about the baby, then. I suppose there's no harm in my asking that. If I live much longer, I sha'n't be allowed to talk about anything except gruel and nightcaps. How's the baby?"

"Oh, he is *so* well, Mrs. Tree, and such a darling! He looks like a perfect beauty in that lovely cloak. I must bring him round in it to show to you. It is the handsomest thing I ever saw, and it didn't look a bit yellow after it was pressed."

"I got it in Canton," said Mrs. Tree. "My baby — I never had but one — was born in the China seas. Here's her coral."

She motioned toward her lap, and Mrs. Bliss saw that a small chest of carved sandal-

wood lay open on her knees, full of trinkets and odds and ends.

"It is very pretty," said little Mrs. Bliss, lifting the coral and bells reverently.

"Her name was Lucy," said Mrs. Tree. "She married Arthur Blyth, cousin to the girls, and died when little Arthur was born. You may have that for your baby; I'm keeping Arthur's for little Vesta's child. If you thank me, you sha'n't have it."

CHAPTER XIV.

TOMMY CANDY, AND THE LETTER HE BROUGHT

"How do you do, Thomas Candy?" said Mrs. Tree.

"How-do-you-do-Missis-Tree-I'm-pretty-well-thank-you-and-hope-you-are-the-same!" replied Tommy Candy, in one breath.

"Humph! you shake hands better than you did; but remember to press with the palm, not pinch with the fingers! Now, what do you want?"

"I brung you a letter," said Tommy Candy. "I was goin' by the post-office, and Mr. Jaquith hollered to me and said bring it to you, and so I brung it."

"I thank you, Thomas," said the old lady, taking the letter and laying it down without

looking at it. "Sit down!. There are burnt almonds in the ivory box. Humph! I hear very bad accounts of you, Tommy Candy."

Tommy looked up from an ardent consideration of the relative size of the burnt almonds; his face was that of a freckled cherub who knew not sin.

"What is all this about Isaac Weight and Timpson Boody, the sexton? I hear you were at the bottom of the affair."

The freckled cherub vanished; instead appeared an imp, with a complex and illuminating grin pervading even the roots of his hair.

"Ho!" he chuckled. "I tell ye, Mis' Tree, I had a time! I tell ye I got even with old Booby and Squashnose Weight, too, that time. Ho! ha! Yes'm, I did."

"You are an extremely naughty boy!" said Mrs. Tree, severely. "Sit there — don't wriggle in your cheer; you are not an eel, though I admit you are the next thing to it

—and tell me every word about it, do you hear?"

"Every word?" echoed Tommy Candy.

"Every word."

Their eyes met; and, if twinkle met twinkle, still her brows were severe, and her cap simply awful. Tommy Candy chuckled again. "I tell ye!" he said.

He reflected a moment, nibbling an almond absently, then leaned forward, and, clasping his hands over both knees, began his tale.

"Old Booby's ben pickin' on me ever sence I can remember. I don't git no comfort goin' to meetin', he picks on me so. Ever anybody sneezes, or drops a hymn-book, or throws a lozenger, he lays it to me, and he ketches me after meetin' and pulls my ears. Last Sunday he took away every lozenger I had, five cents' wuth, jest because I stuck one on Doctor Pottle's co't in the pew front of our'n. So then I swowed I'd have revenge, like that feller

in the poetry-book you lent me. So next day after school I seed him — well, *saw* him — come along with his glass-settin' tools, and go to work settin' some glass in one of the meetin'-house winders. Some o' them little small panes got broke somehow — yes'm, I did, but I never meant to, honest I didn't. I was jest tryin' my new catapult, and I never thought they'd have such measly glass as all that. Well, so I see — saw him get to work, and I says to Squashnose Weight — we was goin' home from school together — I says, 'Let's go up in the gallery!' Old Booby had left the door open, and 'twas right under the gallery that he was to work. So we went up; and I had my pocket full of split peas — no'm, I didn't have my bean-blower along; I'd known better than to take it into the meetin'-house, anyway; and we slipped in behind old Booby's back and got up into the gallery, and I slid the winder up easy, and we commenced droppin'

peas down on his head. He's bald as a bed-post, you know, and to see them peas hop up and roll off — I tell ye, 'twas sport! Old Booby didn't know what in thunder was the matter at first. First two or three he jest kind o' shooed with his hand — thought it was hossflies, mebbe, or June-bugs; but we went on droppin' of 'em, and they hopped and skipped off his head like bullets, and bumby he see one on the ground. He picked it up and looked it all over, and then he looked up. You know how he opens his mouth and sort o' squinnies up his eyes? Mis' Tree, I couldn't help it, no way in the world; I jest dropped a handful of peas right down into his mouth. 'Twa'n't no great of a shot, for he opened the spread of a quart dipper; but Squashnose he sung out 'Gee whittakers!' and raised up his head, and old Booby saw him. Well, the way he dropped his tools and put for the door was a caution. We thought we could get down

before he reached the gallery stairs, but I caught my pants on a nail, and Squashnose got his foot wedged in between two benches, and, by the time we got loose, we heard old Booby comin' poundin' up the stairs like all possessed. There wa'n't nothin' to do then but cut and run up the belfry ladder. We slipped off our shoes and stockin's, and thought mebbe we could get up without him hearin' us, but he did hear, and up he come full chisel, puffin' and cussin' like all creation.

"We waited — there wa'n't nothin' else to do; and I meant — I reely did, Mis' Tree — to own up and say I was sorry and take my lickin'; but that Squashnose Weight — he makes me tired! — the minute he see old Booby's bald head comin' up the ladder, he hollers out, 'Tommy Candy did it, Mr. Boody! Tommy Candy did it; he's got his pocket full of 'em now. I see him!'

"Well, you bet I was mad then! I got holt

of him and give his head one good ram against the wall; and then when old Booby stepped up into the loft, I dropped down on all fours and run between his legs, and upset him onto Squashnose, and clum down the ladder and run home. That was every livin' thing I done, Mis' Tree, honest it was; and they blame it all on me, the lickin' Squashnose got, and all. I give him a good one, too, next day. I druther be me than him, anyway."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Tree. She did not look at Tommy, but held the Chinese screen before her face. "Did — did your father whip you well, Tommy?"

"Yes'm, he did so, the best lickin' I had this year; I dono but the best I ever had, but 'twas wuth it!"

When Master Candy left Mrs. Tree he had a neat and concise little lecture passing through his head, on its way from one ear to the other, and in his pocket an assortment

of squares of fig-paste, red and white. The red, as Mrs. Tree pointed out to him, had nuts in them.

Left alone, the old lady put down the screen, and let the twinkle have its own way. She shook her head two or three times at the fire, and laughed a little rustling laugh.

"Solomon Candy! Solomon Candy!" she said. "A chip of the old block!"

Then she took up her letter.

Half an hour later Miss Vesta, coming in for her daily visit (for Miss Phœbe's death had brought the aunt and niece even nearer together than they were before), found her aunt in a state of high indignation. She began to speak the moment Miss Vesta entered the room.

"Vesta, don't say a word to me! do you hear? not a single word! I will not put up with it for an instant; understand that once and for all!"

"Dear Aunt Marcia," said Miss Vesta, mildly, "I may say good morning, surely? What has put you about to-day?"

"I have had a letter. The impudence of the woman, writing to me! Now, Vesta, don't look at me in that way, for you have some sense, if not much, and you know perfectly well it was impudent. Folderol! don't tell me! her dear aunt, indeed! I'll dear-aunt her, if she tries to set foot in this house."

Miss Vesta's puzzled brow cleared. "Oh," she said, "I see, Aunt Marcia. You also have had a letter from Maria."

"Read it!" said Mrs. Tree. "I'd take it up with the tongs, if I were you."

Miss Vesta did not think it necessary to obey this injunction, but unfolded the square of scented paper which her aunt indicated, and read as follows:

"My dear Aunt: — I was much grieved to hear of poor Phœbe's death. It seems very strange that I was not informed of her illness; being her own first cousin, it would have been natural and gratifying for me to have shared the last sad hours with you and Vesta; but malice is no part of my nature, and I am quite ready to overlook the neglect. You and Vesta must miss Phœbe sadly, and be very lonely, and I feel it a duty that I must not shirk to come and show you both that to *me*, at least, blood is thicker than water. One drop of Darracott blood, I always say, is enough to establish a claim on me. It is a long time since I have been in Elmerton, and I should like above all things to bring my two sweet girls, to show them their mother's early home, and present them to their venerable relation. I think you would find them *not inferior*, to say the least, to some others who have been more put forward to catch the eye. A violet by a mossy stone has always been *my* idea of a young woman. However, my daughters' engagements are so numerous, and they are so much *sought after*, that it will be impossible for me to bring them at present; later I shall hope to do so. I propose to divide my visit *impartially* between you and poor Vesta, but shall go to her first, being the one in affliction, since such we are bidden to visit.

"Looking forward with great pleasure to my visit with you, and hoping that this may find you in the enjoyment of such a measure of health as your advanced years may allow, I am, my dear Aunt,

"Your affectionate niece,

"MARIA DARRACOTT PRYOR."

"When you have finished it, you may put it into the fire," said Mrs. Tree. "Bah! what did she say to you? Cat! I don't mean you, Vesta."

But Miss Vesta, with all her dove-like qualities, had something of the wisdom of the serpent, and had no idea of repeating what Mrs. Pryor had said to her. Several phrases rose to her mind, — "Aunt Marcia's few remaining days on earth," "precarious spiritual condition of which reports have reached me," "spontaneous distribution of family property," etc., — and she rejoiced in being able to say calmly, "I did not bring the letter with me, Aunt Marcia. Maria speaks of her intended visit, and seems to look forward with much pleasure to —"

"Vesta Blyth," said Mrs. Tree, "look me in the eye!"

"Yes, dear Aunt Marcia," said the little lady. Her soft brown eyes met fearlessly the black sparks which gleamed from under Mrs. Tree's eyebrows. She smiled, and laid her hand gently on that of the elder woman.

"There is no earthly use in your smiling at me, Vesta," the old lady went on. "I see nothing whatever to smile about. I wish simply to say, as I have said before, that after I am dead you may do as you please; but I am not dead yet, and while I live, Maria Darracott sets no foot in this house."

"Dear Aunt Marcia!"

"No foot in this house!" repeated Mrs. Tree. "Not the point of her toe, if she had a point. She was born splay-footed, and I suppose she'll die so. Not the point of her toe!"

Miss Vesta was silent for a moment. If she

were only like Phœbe! She must try her best to do as Phœbe would have wished.

"Aunt Marcia," she said, "you have always been so near and dear — so very near and so infinitely dear and kind, to us, — especially to Nathaniel and me, and to Nathaniel's children, — that I fear you sometimes forget the fact that Maria is precisely the same relation to you that we are."

"Cat's foot, fiddlestick, folderol, fudge!" remarked Mrs. Tree, blandly.

"Dear Aunt Marcia, do not speak so, I beg of you. Only think, Uncle James, Maria's father, was your own brother."

"His wife wasn't my own sister!" said Mrs. Tree, grimly. Then she blazed out suddenly. "Vesta Blyth, you are a good girl, and I am very fond of you; but I know what I am about, and I behave as I intend to behave. My brother James was a good man, though I never could understand the ground he took about

the Copleys. He had no more right to them — but that is neither here nor there. His wife was a cat, and her mother before her was a cat, and her daughter after her is a cat. I don't like cats, and I never have had them in this house, and I never will. That's all there is to it. If that woman comes here, I'll set the parrot on her."

"Scat!" said the parrot, waking from a doze and ruffling his feathers. "*Quousque tandem, O Catilina?* Vesta, Vesta, don't you pester!"

Miss Vesta sighed. "Then — what will you say to Maria, Aunt Marcia?"

"I sha'n't say anything to her!" replied the old lady, snappishly.

"Surely you must answer her letter, dear."

"Must I! 'Must got bust,' they used to say when I was a girl."

"Surely you *will* answer it?" said Miss Vesta, altering the unlucky form of words.

"Nothing of the sort! She has had the

impudence to write to me, and she can answer herself."

"She cannot very well do that, Aunt Marcia."

"Then she can go without.

"'Tiddy hi, toddy ho,
Tiddy hi hum,
Thus was it when Barbara Popkins was young!'"

Miss Vesta sighed again; it was always a bad sign when Mrs. Tree began to sing.

"Very well, Aunt Marcia," she said, after a pause, rising. "I will answer for both, then. I will say that —"

"Say that I am blind, deaf, and dumb!" her aunt commanded. "Say that I have the mumps and the chicken-pox, and am recommended absolute retirement. Say I have my sins to think about, and have no time for anything else. Say anything you like, Vesta, but run along now, like a good girl, and let me get smoothed out before that poor little parson

comes to see me. He's coming at five. Last time I scared him out of a year's growth — te-hee! — and he has none to spare, inside or out. Good-by, my dear."

CHAPTER XV.

MARIA

"My dearest Vesta, what a pleasure to see you! You are looking wretched, simply wretched! How thankful I am that I came!"

Mrs. Pryor embraced her cousin with effusion. She was short and fair, with prominent eyes and teeth, and she wore a dress that crackled and ornaments that clinked. Miss Vesta, in her dove-colored cashmere and white net, seemed to melt into her surroundings and form part of them, but Mrs. Pryor stood out against them like a pump against an evening sky.

"It was very kind of you to come, Maria," said Miss Vesta, "very kind indeed. I trust you had a comfortable journey, and are not too tired."

"My dear," said Mrs. Pryor, buoyantly, "I am never tired. Watchspring and wire — Mr. Pryor always said that was what his little Maria was made of. But it would have made no difference if I had been at the point of exhaustion, I would have made any effort to come to you. Darracott blood, my love! Any one who has a drop of Darracott blood in his veins can call upon me for anything; how much more you, who are my own first cousin. Poor, dear Phœbe, what a loss! You are not in black, I see. Ah! I remember her peculiar views. You feel bound to respect them. I consider that a mistake, Vesta. We must respect, but we are not called upon to imitate the eccentricities — "

"I share my sister's views," said Miss Vesta, tranquilly. "Will you have a cup of tea now, Maria, or would you like to go to your room at once?"

"Neither, my dear, just at this moment,"

said Mrs. Pryor, vivaciously. "I must just take a glance around. Dear me! how many years is it since I have been in this house? Had Phœbe aged as much as you have, Vesta? Single women, of course, always age faster, — no young life to keep them girlish. Ah! you must see my two sweet girls. Angels, Vesta! and Darracotts to their finger-ends. I feel like a child again, positively like a child. The parlor is exactly as I remember it, only faded. Things do fade so, don't they? It's a mistake not to keep your furniture fresh and up to date. I should re-cover those chairs, if I were you; nothing would be easier. A few yards of something bright and pretty, a few brass-headed nails — why, I could do it in a couple of hours. We must see what we can do, Vesta. And it is a pity, it seems to me, to have everything so bare, tables and all. Beautiful polish, to be sure, but they look so bleak. A chenille cover, now, here and there, a bright

drape or two, would transform this room; all this old red damask is terribly antiquated, my dear. It comes of having no young life about you, as I said. My girls have such taste! You should see our parlor at home — not an inch but is covered with something bright and æsthetic. Ah! here are the portraits. Yes, to be sure. Do you know, Vesta, I have often thought of writing to you and Phœbe — in fact, I was on the point of it when the sad news came of poor Phœbe's being taken — about these portraits of Grandfather and Grandmother Darracott. Grandmother Darracott left them to your branch, I am well aware of that; but justice is justice, and I do think we ought to have one of them. We have just as much Darracott blood in our veins as you have, and you and Phœbe were always Blyth all over, while the Darracott nose and chin show so strongly in me and my children. You have no children, Vesta, and I

always think it is the future generations that should be considered. We are passing away, my dear, — in the midst of life, you know, and poor Phœbe's death reminds us of it, I'm sure, more than ever — you don't look as if you had more than a year or two before you yourself, Vesta, — but — well — and so — I confess it seems to me as if you might feel more at ease in your mind if we had one of the portraits. Of course I should be willing to pay something, though I always think it a pity for money to pass between blood relations. What do you say?"

She paused, somewhat out of breath, and sat creaking and clinking, and fanning herself with a Chinese hand-screen.

Miss Vesta looked up at the portraits. Grandmother Darracott in turban and shawl, Grandfather Darracott splendid with frill and gold seals, looked down on her benignantly, as they had always looked. They had been part

of her life, these kindly, silent figures. She had always felt sure of Grandmother Darracott's sympathy and understanding. Sometimes when, as a child, she fancied herself naughty (but she never was!), she would appeal from the keen, inquiring gaze of Grandfather Darracott to those soft brown eyes, so like her own, if she had only known it; and the brown eyes never failed to comfort and reassure her.

Part with one of those pictures? A month ago the request would have brought her distress and searchings of heart, with wonder whether it might not be her duty to do so just because it was painful; but Miss Vesta was changed. It was as if Miss Phœbe, in passing, had let the shadow of her mantle fall on her younger sister.

"I cannot consider the question, Maria!" she said, quietly. "My dear sister would have been quite unwilling to do so, I am

sure. And now, as I have duties to attend to, shall I show you your room?"

Miss Vesta drifted up the wide staircase, and Mrs. Pryor stumped and creaked behind her.

"You have put me in Phœbe's room, I suppose," said the visitor, as they reached the landing. "So near you, I can give you any attention you may need in the night. Besides, the sun — oh, the dimity room! Well, I dare say it will do well enough. Stuffy, isn't it? but I am the easiest person in the world to satisfy. And *how* is Aunt Marcia? I shall go to see her the first thing in the morning; she will hardly expect me to call this afternoon, though I could make a special effort if you think she would feel sensitive."

"Indeed, Maria, I am very sorry, but I don't feel sure — in fact, I rather fear that you may not be able to see Aunt Marcia, at all events just at present."

"Not be able to see her! My dear Vesta, what can you mean? Why, I am going to *stay* with Aunt Marcia. I wrote to her as well as to you, and said that I should divide my visit equally between you. Of course I feel all that I owe to you, my love; I have made all my arrangements for a long stay; indeed, it happens to fit in very well with my plans, but I need not trouble you with details now. What I mean to say is, that in spite of all I owe to you, I have also a sacred duty to fulfil toward my aunt. It is impossible in the nature of things that she should live much longer, and as her own niece and the mother of a family I am bound, solemnly bound, to soothe and cheer a few, at least, of her closing days. I suppose the dear old thing feels a little hurt that I did not go to her first, from what you say; old people are very tetchy, I ought to have remembered that, but you were the one in affliction, and I felt bound —

but I will make that all right, never fear, in the morning. There, my dear, don't, I beg of you, give yourself the slightest uneasiness about the matter! I am quite able to take care of myself, and of you and Aunt Marcia into the bargain. You do not know me, my dear! Yes, Diploma can bring me the tea now, and I will unpack and set things to rights a bit. You will not mind if I move the furniture about a little? I have my own ideas, and they are not always such bad ones. Good-by, my love! Go and rest now, you look like a ghost. I shall have to take you in hand at once, I see; so fortunate that I came. *Good*-by!"

Miss Vesta, descending the stairs with a troubled brow, was met by Diploma with the announcement that Doctor Stedman was in the parlor.

"Oh!" Miss Vesta breathed a little sigh of pleasure and relief, and hastened down.

"Good afternoon, James! I am rejoiced to see you. I — something perplexing has occurred; perhaps you may be able to advise me. Sister Phœbe would have known exactly what to do, but I confess I am puzzled. Our — my cousin, Mrs. Pryor, has arrived this afternoon."

"Mrs. Pryor!" said Doctor Stedman. "Any one I ought to know?"

"Maria Darracott. Surely you remember her?"

"Hum! yes, I remember *her*. She hasn't come here, to this house?"

"Yes; she is up-stairs now, unpacking her trunk. She has come to make a long stay, it would appear from the size of the trunk. Of course I am — of course it was very kind in her to come, and I shall do my best to make her stay agreeable; but — James, she intends to make Aunt Marcia a visit, too, and Aunt Marcia absolutely refuses to see her. What shall I do?"

Doctor Stedman chuckled. "Do? I wish you had followed your aunt's example; but that was not to be expected. Hum! I don't see that you can do anything. Your aunt is not amenable to the bit, not even the slightest snaffle; as to driving her with a curb, I should like to see the man who would attempt it. Won't see her, eh? ho! ho! Mrs. Tree is the one consistent woman I have ever known."

"But Maria is entirely unconvinced, James; I cannot make any impression upon her. She is determined to go to see Aunt Marcia tomorrow, and I fear —"

"Let her go! she is of age, if I remember rightly; let her go and try for herself. You are not responsible for what occurs. Vesta — let me look at you! Hum! I wish you would turn this visitor out, and go away somewhere for a bit."

"Go away, James? I?"

"Yes, you! You are not looking at all the thing, I tell you. It's all very well and very — everything that is like you — to take this trouble simply and naturally, but whatever you may say and believe, there is the shock and there is the strain, and those are things we have to pay for sooner or later. Go away, I tell you! Send away this — this visitor, give Diploma the key, and go off somewhere for a month or two. Go and make Nat a visit! Poor old Nat, he's lonely enough, with little Vesta and her husband in Europe. Think what it would mean to him, Vesta, to have you with him for awhile!"

"My dear James, you take my breath away," said Miss Vesta, fluttering a little. "You are most kind and friendly, but — but it would not be possible for me to go away. I could not think of it for a moment, even if the laws of hospitality did not bind me as long as Maria — my own cousin, remember,

James — chooses to stay here. I could not think of it."

"I should like to know why!" said Doctor Stedman, obstinately. "I should like to know what your reasons are, Vesta."

"Oh!" Miss Vesta sighed, as if she felt the hopelessness of fluttering her wings against the dead wall of masculinity before her; nevertheless she spoke up bravely.

"I have given you one reason already, James. It would be not only unseemly, but impossible, for me to leave my guest. But even without that, even if I were entirely alone, still I could not go. My duties; the house; my dear sister's ideas, — she always said a house could not be left for a month by the entire family without deteriorating in some way — though Diploma is most excellent, most faithful. Then, — it is a small matter, but — I have always cared for my seaward lamp in person. I have never been

away, James, since — I first lighted the lamp. Then — "

"I am still waiting for a reason," said Doctor Stedman, grimly. "I have not heard what I call one yet."

The soft color rose in Miss Vesta's face, and she lifted her eyes to his with a look he had seen in them once or twice before.

"Then here is one for you, James," she said, quietly. "I do not wish to go!"

Doctor Stedman rose abruptly, and tramped up and down the room in moody silence. Miss Vesta sighed, and watched his feet. They were heavily booted, but — no, there were no nails in them, and the shining floor remained intact.

Suddenly he came to a stop in front of her.

"What if I carried you off, you inflexible little piece of porcelain?" he said. "What if — Vesta, — may I speak once more?"

"Oh, if you would please not, James!"

cried Miss Vesta, a soft hurry in her voice, her cheeks very pink. "I should be so truly grateful to you if you would not. I am so happy in your friendship, James. It is such a comfort, such a reliance to me. Do not, I beg of you, my dear friend, disturb it."

"But — you are alone, child. If Phœbe had lived, I had made up my mind never to trouble you again. She is gone, and you are alone, and tired, and — I find it hard to bear, Vesta. I do indeed."

He spoke with heat and feeling. Miss Vesta's eyes were full of tenderness as she raised them to his.

"You are so kind, James!" she said. "No one ever had a kinder or more faithful friend; of that I am sure. But you must never think that, about my being alone. I am never alone; almost never — at least, not so very often, even lonely. I live with a whole life-full of blessed memories. Besides, I have Aunt

Marcia. She needs me more and more, and by and by, when her marvellous strength begins to fail, — for it must fail, — she will need me constantly. I can never, never feel alone while Aunt Marcia lives."

"Hum!" said Doctor Stedman. "Well, good-by! Poison Maria's tea, and I'll let you off with that. I'll send you up a powder of corrosive sublimate in the morning — there! there! don't look horrified. You never can understand — or I never can. I mean, I'll send you some bromide for yourself. Don't tell me that you are sleeping well, for I know better. Good-by, my dear!"

CHAPTER XVI.

DOCTOR STEDMAN'S PATIENT

BRIGHT and early the next morning, Mrs. Pryor presented herself at Mrs. Tree's door. It was another Indian summer morning, mild and soft. As she came up the street, Mrs. Pryor had seen, or thought she had seen, a figure sitting in the wicker rocking-chair on the porch. The chair was empty now, but it was rocking — perhaps with the wind.

Direxia Hawkes answered the visitor's knock.

"How do you do, Direxia?" said Mrs. Pryor, in sprightly tones. "You remember me, of course, — Miss Maria. Will you tell Mrs. Tree that I have come, please?"

She made a motion to enter, but Direxia stood in the doorway, grim and forbidding.

"Mis' Tree can't see anybody this morning," she said.

Mrs. Pryor smiled approvingly. "I see you are a good watch-dog, Direxia. Very proper, I am sure, not to let my aunt, at her age, be annoyed by ordinary visitors; but your care is unnecessary in this case. I will just step into the parlor, and you can tell her that I am here. Probably she will wish me to come up at once to her room, but you may as well go first, just to prepare her. Any shock, however joyful, is to be avoided with the aged."

She moved forward again, but Direxia Hawkes did not stir.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I am so; but I can't let you in, Mis' Pryor, I can't nohow."

"Cannot let me in?" repeated Mrs. Pryor. "What does this mean? It is some conspiracy. Of course I know there is a jealousy, but this is too — stand aside this moment, my good creature, and don't be insolent, or you

will repent of it. I shall inform my aunt. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes'm, I know well enough who you are. Yes'm, I know you are her own niece, but if you was fifty nieces I couldn't let you in. She ain't goin' to see a livin' soul to-day except Doctor Stedman. You might see him, after he's ben here," she added, relenting a little at the keen chagrin in the visitor's face.

Mrs. Pryor caught at the straw.

"Ah! she has sent for Doctor Stedman. Very right, very proper! Of course, if my aunt does not think it wise to see any one until after the physician's visit, I can understand that. Nobody is more careful about such matters than I am. I will see Doctor Stedman myself, get his advice and directions, and call again. Give my love to my aunt, Direxia, and tell her" — she stretched her neck toward the door — "tell her that I am greatly distressed not to see her, and still

more to hear that she is indisposed; but that very soon, as soon as possible after the doctor's visit, I shall come again and devote myself to her."

"Scat!" said a harsh voice from within.

"Mercy on me! what's that?" cried Mrs. Pryor.

"Scat! *quousque tandem, O Catilina?* Helen was a beauty, Xantippe was —"

"Hold your tongue!" said Direxia Hawkes, hastily. "It's only the parrot. He is the worst-actin' — good mornin', Mis' Pryor!"

She closed the door on a volley of screeches that was pouring from the doorway.

Mrs. Pryor, rustling and crackling with indignation against the world in general, made her way down the garden path. She was fumbling with the latch of the gate, when the door of the opposite house opened, and a large woman came out and, hastening across the road, met her with outstretched hand.

"Do tell me if this isn't Mis' Pryor!" said the large women, cordially. "I felt sure it must be you; I heard you was in town. You haven't forgotten Mis' Weight, Malviny Askem as was? Well, I am pleased to see you. Walk in, won't you? now do! Why, you *are* a stranger! Step right in this way!"

Nothing loth, Mrs. Pryor stepped in, and was ushered into the sitting-room.

"Deacon, here's an old friend, if I may presume to say so; Mis' Pryor, Miss Maria Darracott as was. You'll be rejoiced, well I know. Isick and Annie Lizzie, come here this minute and shake hands! Your right hand, Annie Lizzie, and take your finger out of your mouth, or I'll sl— I shall have to speak to you. Let me take your bunnet, Maria, mayn't I?"

Deacon Weight heaved himself out of his chair, and received the visitor with ponderous cordiality. "It is a long time since we have had the pleasure of welcoming you to Elmer-

ton, Mrs. Pryor," he said. "Your family has sustained a great loss, ma'am, a great loss. Miss Phœbe Blyth is universally lamented."

Yes, indeed, a sad loss, Mrs. Pryor said. She regretted deeply that she had not been able to be present at the last sad rites. She had been tenderly attached to her cousin, whom she had not seen for twenty years.

"But I have come now," she said, "to devote myself to those who remain. My cousin Vesta looks sadly ill and shrunken, really an old woman, and my aunt Mrs. Tree is seriously ill, I am told, unable even to see me until after the doctor's visit. Very sad! At her age, of course the slightest thing in the nature of a seizure would probably be fatal. Have you seen her recently, may I ask?"

Deacon Weight crossed and uncrossed his legs uneasily. Mrs. Weight bridled, and pursed her lips.

"We don't often see Mis' Tree to speak to,"

she said. "There's those you can be neighborly with, and there's those you can't. Mis' Tree has never showed the wish to *be* neighborly, and I am not one to put forth, neither is the deacon. Where we are wished for, we go, and the reverse, we stay away. We do what duty calls for, no more. I did see Mis' Tree at Phœbe's funeral," she added, "and she looked gashly then. I hope she is prepared, I reelly do. I know Phœbe was real uneasy about her. We make her the subject of prayer, the deacon and I, but that's all we *can* do; and I feel bound to say to you, Mis' Pryor, that in *my* opinion, your aunt's soul is in a more perilous way than her body."

Mrs. Pryor seemed less concerned about the condition of Mrs. Tree's soul than might have been expected. She asked many questions about the old lady's manner of life, who came to the house, how she spent her time, etc. Mrs. Weight answered with eager volubility.

She told how often the butcher came, and what costly delicacies he left; how few and far between were what she might call spiritooal visits; "for our pastor is young, Mis' Pryor, and it's not to be expected that he could have the power of exhortation to compare with those who have labored in the vineyard the len'th of time Deacon Weight has. Then, too, she has a way that rides him down — Mr. Bliss, I'm speakin' of — and makes him ready to talk about any truck and dicker she likes. I see him come out the other day, laughin' fit to split; you'd never think he was a minister of the gospel. Not that I should wish to be understood as sayin' anything against Mr. Bliss; the young are easily led, even the best of them. Isick, don't stand gappin' there! Shut your mouth, and go finish your chores. And Annie Lizzie, you go and peel some apples for mother. Yes, you can, just as well as not; don't answer me like

that! No, you don't want a cooky now, you ain't been up from breakfast more than — well, just one, then, and mind you pick out a small one! Mis' Pryor, I didn't like to speak too plain before them innocents, but it's easy to see why Mis' Tree clings as she doos to the things of this world. If I had the outlook she has for the next, I should tremble in my bed, I should so."

Finally the visitor departed, promising to come again soon. After a baffled glance at Mrs. Tree's house, which showed an uncompromising front of closed windows and muslin curtains, she made her way to the post-office, where for a stricken hour she harried Mr. Homer Hollopeter. She was his cousin too, in the fifth or sixth degree, and as she cheerfully told him, Darracott blood was a bond, even to the last drop of it. She questioned him as to his income, his housekeeping, his reasons for remaining single, which appeared to

her insufficient, not to say childish; she commented on his looks, the fashion of his dress (it was a manifest absurdity for a man of his years to wear a sky-blue neck-tie!), the decorations of his office. She thought a portrait of the President, or George Washington, would be more appropriate than those dingy engravings. Who were — oh, Keats and Shelley? No one admired poetry more than she did; she had read Keats's "Christian Year" only a short time ago; charming!

"And what is that landscape, Cousin Homer? Something foreign, evidently. I always think that a government office should be representative *of* the government. I have a print at home, a bird's-eye view of Washington in 1859, which I will send you if you like. I suppose you have an express frank? No? How mean of Congress! What did you say this mountain was?"

Mr. Homer, who had received Mrs. Pryor's

remarks in meekness and — so far as might be — in silence, waving his head and arms now and then in mute dissent, now looked up at the mountain photograph; he opened and shut his mouth several times before he found speech.

"The picture," he said, slowly, "represents a — a— mountain; a — a — in short, — a mountain!" and not another word could he be got to say about it.

Doctor Stedman had a long round to go that day, and it was not till late afternoon that he reached home and found a message from Mrs. Tree saying that she wished to see him. He hastened to the house; Direxia, who had evidently been watching for him, opened the door almost before he knocked.

"Nothing serious, I trust, Direxia!" he asked, anxiously. "I have been out of town, and am only just back."

"Hush!" whispered Direxia, with a glance

toward the parlor door. "I don't know; I can't make out — "

"Come in, James Stedman!" called Mrs. Tree from the parlor. "Don't stand there gossiping with Direxia; I didn't send for you to see her."

Direxia lifted her hands and eyes with an eloquent gesture. "She is the beat of all!" she murmured, and fled to her kitchen.

Entering the parlor Doctor Stedman found Mrs. Tree sitting by the fire as usual, with her feet on the fender. Sitting, but not attired, as usual. She was dressed, or rather enveloped, in a vast quilted wrapper of flowered satin, tulips and poppies on a pale buff ground, and her head was surmounted by the most astonishing nightcap that ever the mind of woman devised. So ample and manifold were its flapping borders, and so small the keen brown face under them, that Doctor Stedman, though not an imaginative person, could think

of nothing but a walnut set in the centre of a cauliflower.

"Good afternoon, James Stedman!" said the old lady. "I am sick, you see."

"I see, Mrs. Tree," said the doctor, glancing from the wrapper and cap to the bowl and spoon that stood on the violet-wood table. He had seen these things before. "You don't feel seriously out of trim, I hope?"

Mrs Tree fixed him with a bright black eye.

"At my age, James, everything is serious," she said, gravely. "You know that as well as I do."

"Yes, I know that!" said Doctor Stedman. He laid his hand on her wrist for a moment, then returned her look with one as keen as her own.

"Have you any symptoms for me?"

"I thought that was your business!" said the patient.

"Hum!" said Doctor Stedman. "How long. have you been — a — feeling like this?"

"Ever since yesterday; no, the day before. I am excessively nervous, James. I am unfit to talk, utterly unfit; I cannot see people. I want you to keep people away from me for — for some days. You must see that I am unfit to see anybody!"

"Ha!" said Doctor Stedman.

"It agitates me!" cried the old lady. "At my age I cannot afford to be agitated. Have some orange cordial, James; do! it is in the Moorish cabinet there, the right-hand cupboard. Yes, you may bring two glasses if you like; I feel a sinking. You see that I am in no condition for visitors."

The corners of Doctor Stedman's gray beard twitched; but he poured a small portion of the cordial into two fat little gilt tumblers, and handed one gravely to his patient.

"Perhaps this is as good medicine as you

"'PERHAPS THIS IS AS GOOD MEDICINE AS YOU CAN TAKE!' HE SAID."

can take!" he said. "Delicious! Does the secret of this die with Direxia? But I'll put you up some powders, Mrs. Tree, for the — a — nervousness; and I certainly think it would be a good plan for you to keep very quiet for awhile."

"I'll see no one!" cried the old lady. "Not even Vesta, James!"

"Hum!" said Doctor Stedman. "Well, if you say so, not even Vesta."

"Vesta is so literal, you see!" said Mrs. Tree, comfortably. "Then that is settled; and you will give your orders to Direxia. I am utterly unfit to talk, and you forbid me to see anybody. How do you think Vesta is looking, James?"

Doctor Stedman's eyes, which had been twinkling merrily under his shaggy eyebrows, grew suddenly grave.

"Badly!" he said, briefly. "Worn, tired — almost sick. She ought to have absolute rest,

mind, body, and soul, and, instead of that, here comes this —"

"Catamaran?" suggested Mrs. Tree, blandly.

"You know her better than I do," said James Stedman. "Here she comes, at any rate, and settles down on Vesta, and announces that she has come to stay. It ought not to be allowed. Mrs. Tree, I want Vesta to go away; *she* is unfit for visitors, if you will. I want her to go off somewhere for an entire change. Can it not be managed in some way?"

"Why don't you take her?" said Mrs. Tree.

The slow red crept into James Stedman's strong, kindly face. He made no reply at first, but sat looking into the fire, while the old woman watched him.

At last — "You asked me that once before, Mrs. Tree," he said, with an effort; "how many years ago was it? Never mind! I can only make the same answer that I made then. She will not come."

"Have you tried again, James?"

"Yes, I have tried again, or — tried to try. I will not persecute her; I told you that before."

"Has the little idiot — has she any reason to give?"

Doctor Stedman gave a short laugh. "She doesn't wish it; isn't that reason enough? I said something about her being alone; I couldn't help it, she looked so little, and — but she feels that she will never be alone so long as — that is, she feels that she has all the companionship she needs."

"So long as what? So long as I am alive, hey?" said the old lady. Her eyes were like sparks of black fire, but James Stedman would not meet them. He stared moodily before him, and made no reply.

"I am a meddlesome old woman!" said Mrs. Tree. "You wish I would leave you alone, James Stedman, and so I will. Old women

ought to be strangled; there's some place where they do it, Cap'n Tree told me about it once; I suppose it's because they talk too much. She said she shouldn't be alone while I lived, hey? Where are you going, James? Stay and have supper with me; do! it would be a charity; and there's a larded partridge with bread sauce. Direxia's bread sauce is the best in the world, you know that."

"Yes, I know!" said Doctor Stedman, his eyes twinkling once more as he took up his hat. "I wish I could stay, but I have still one or two calls to make. But — larded partridge, Mrs. Tree, in your condition! I am surprised at you. I would recommend a cup of gruel and a slice of thin toast without butter."

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree. "Well, good-night, James; and don't forget the orders to Direxia: I am utterly unfit to talk and must not see any one."

CHAPTER XVII.

NOT YET!

How it happened that, in spite of the strict interdict laid upon all visitors at Mrs. Tree's house, Tommy Candy found his way in, nobody knows to this day. Direxia Hawkes found him in the front entry one afternoon, and pounced upon him with fury. The boy showed every sign of guilt and terror, but refused to say why he had come or what he wanted. As he was hustled out of the door a voice from above was heard to cry, "The ivory elephant for your own, mind, and a box of the kind with nuts in it!" Sometimes Jocko could imitate his mistress's voice to perfection.

Mrs. Weight, whom the news of Mrs. Tree's

actual illness had wrought to a fever-pitch of observation, saw the boy come out, and carried the word at once to Mrs. Pryor; in ten minutes that lady was at the door clamoring for entrance. Direxia, her apron at her eyes, was firm, but evidently in distress.

"She's took to her bed!" she said. "I darsn't let you in; it'd be as much as my life is wuth and her'n too, the state she's in. I think she's out of her head, Mis' Pryor. There! she's singin' this minute; do hear her! Oh, my poor lady! I wish Doctor Stedman would come!"

Over the stairs came floating, in a high-pitched thread of voice, a scrap of eldritch song:

"Tiddy hi, toddy ho,
Tiddy hi hum,
Thus was it when Barbara Popkins was young!"

Mrs. Pryor hastened back and told Miss Vesta that their aunt was delirious, and had

probably but a few hours to live. Poor Miss Vesta! she would have broken through any interdict and flown to her aunt's side; but she herself was housed with a heavy, feverish cold, and Doctor Stedman's commands were absolute. "You may say what you like to your friend," he said, "but you must obey your physician. I know what I am about, and I forbid you to leave the house!"

At these words Miss Vesta leaned back on her sofa-pillow with a gentle sigh. James did know what he was about, of course; and — since he had privately assured her that he did not consider Mrs. Tree in any danger, and since she really felt quite unable to stand, much less to go out — it was very comfortable to be absolutely forbidden to do so. Still it was not a pleasant day for Miss Vesta. Mrs. Pryor never left her side, declaring that *this* duty at least she could and would perform, and Vesta might be assured she would

never desert her; and the stream of talk about the Darracott blood, the family portraits, and the astonishing moral obliquity of most persons except Mrs. Pryor herself, flowed on and around and over Miss Vesta's aching head till she felt that she was floating away on waves of the fluid which is thicker than water.

In the afternoon a bolt fell. It was about five o'clock, near the time for Doctor Stedman's daily visit, when the door flew open without knock or ring, and Tragedy appeared on the threshold in the person of Mrs. Malvina Weight. Speechless, she stood in the doorway and beckoned. She had been running, a method of locomotion for which nature had not intended her; her breath came in quick gasps, and her face was as the face of a Savoy cabbage.

"For pity's sake!" cried Mrs. Pryor. "What is the matter, Malvina?"

"She's gone!" gasped Mrs. Weight.

"Who's gone? Do speak up! What do you mean, Malvina Weight?"

"Mis' Tree! there's crape on the door. I see it — three minutes ago — with these eyes! I run all the way — just as I was; I've got my death, I expect — palpitations — I had to come. She's gone in her sins! Oh, girls, ain't it awful?"

Miss Vesta, pale and trembling, tried to rise, but fell back on the sofa.

"James!" she said, faintly; "where is James Stedman?"

"Stay where you are, Vesta Blyth!" cried Mrs. Pryor. "I will send for Doctor Stedman; I will attend to everything. I am going to the house myself this instant. Here, Diploma! come and take care of your mistress! cologne, salts, whatever you have. I must fly!"

And as a hen flies, fluttering and cackling, so did Mrs. Pryor flutter and cackle,

up the street, with Mrs. Weight, still breathless, pounding and gasping in her wake.

"For the land's sake, what is the matter?" asked Diploma Crotty, appearing in the parlor doorway with a flushed cheek and floury hands. "Miss Vesty, I give you to understand that I ain't goin' to be called from my bread by no — my dear heart alive! what has happened?"

Miss Vesta put her hand to her throat.

"My aunt, Diploma!" she whispered. "She — Mrs. Weight says there is crape on the door. I — I seem to have lost my strength. Oh, where is Doctor Stedman?"

A brown, horrified face looked for an instant over Diploma's shoulder; the face of Direxia Hawkes, who had come in search of something her mistress wanted, leaving the second maid in charge of her patient; it vanished, and another figure scurried up the street, breathless with fear and wonder.

"You lay down, Miss Vesty!" commanded Diploma. "Lay down this minute, that's a good girl. Whoever's dead, you ain't, and I don't want you should. There! Here comes Doctor Stedman this minute. I'll run and let him in. Oh, Doctor Stedman, it ain't true, is it?"

"Probably not," said Doctor Stedman "What is it?"

"Ain't you been at Mis' Tree's?"

"No, I am going there now. I have been out in the country. What is the matter?"

"James!" cried Miss Vesta's voice.

The sound of it struck the physician's ear; he looked at Diploma.

"What has happened?"

"Go in! go in and see her!" whispered the old woman. "They say Mis' Tree's dead; I dono; but go in, do, there's a good soul!"

"Oh, James!" cried Miss Vesta, and she held out both hands, trembling with fever and

distress. "I am so glad you have come. James! Aunt Marcia is dead; there is crape on her door. Did you know? Were you with her? Oh, James, I am all alone now. I am all alone in the world!"

"Never, while I am alive!" said James Stedman, catching the little trembling hands in his. "Look up, Vesta! Cheer up, my dear! You can never be alone while I am in the same world with you. If your aunt is indeed dead, then you belong to me, Vesta; why, you know you do, you foolish little woman. There! there! stop trembling. My dear, did you think I would let you be really alone for five minutes?"

"Oh, James!" cried Miss Vesta. "Consider our age! Sister Phœbe —"

"I do consider our age," said Doctor Stedman. "It is just what I consider. We have no more time to waste. And Phœbe is not here. Here, drink this, my dear love! Now

let me tuck you up again while I go and see what all this is about. Who told you Mrs. Tree was dead? She was alive enough this morning."

"Mrs. Weight. She saw the crape on the door, and came straight here to tell us. It was thoughtful, James, but so sudden, and you were not here. Maria has gone up there now. Oh, my poor Aunt Marcia!"

"Hum!" said Doctor Stedman. "Mrs. Weight and Mrs. Pryor, eh? A precious pair! Well, I will soon find out the truth and let you know. Good-by, little woman!"

"Oh, James!" said Miss Vesta, "do you really think —"

"I don't think, I know!" said James Stedman. "Good-by, my Vesta!"

Sure enough, there was crape on the door of Mrs. Tree's house — a long rusty streamer. It hung motionless in the quiet evening air, eloquent of many things.

The door itself was unlocked, and Mrs. Pryor tumbled in headlong, with Mrs. Weight at her heels. Both women were too breathless to speak. They rushed into the parlor, and stood there, literally mopping and mowing at each other, handkerchief in hand.

Something about the air of the little room seemed to arrest the frenzied rush of their curiosity. Yet all was as usual: the dim, antique richness, the warm scent of the fragrant woods, the living presence — was it the only presence? — of the fire on the hearth. Even when the two had recovered their breath, neither spoke for some minutes, and it was only when a brand broke and fell forward in tinkling red coals on the marble hearth that Mrs. Pryor found her voice.

"I declare, Malvina, I feel as if there were some one in this room. I never was in it without Aunt Marcia, and it seems as if she must come in this minute."

"It doos so!" said Mrs. Weight in, a frightened half-whisper. "In that chair she set, every time I ever was in this room, too, Maria. Maybe her sperit hovers now. Ain't it an awful disposition?"

"Dispensation, my good Malvina!" said Mrs. Pryor. "It is indeed a solemn occasion. Did that curtain move? No, 'twas only the firelight. Firelight plays such tricks sometimes. I declare, I don't know when I have felt so nervous."

"Shall we go right up-stairs?" whispered Mrs. Weight. "I presume you'll wish to be the first to view the —"

"In just a minute!" said Mrs. Pryor. "There's no haste; and I feel — I don't mind saying it to you, Malvina, but I feel dashed, somehow. I believe I'll wait till Doctor Stedman comes before I go up-stairs. After all, the physician should be the first — I shall always think it very neglectful of Doctor

Stedman not to have been here; criminal, I may almost say. Another thing, I want to take a look round this room. It's years since I have been here. You need not speak of it, Malvina, but I suppose all this will come to me. Vesta has her own house, and Nathaniel's children are married and have homes of their own. I have always coveted this house, though I never agreed with Aunt Marcia's ideas of furnishing. This room is terribly dark, with all that red cedar and the other outlandish woods. Just a fad of Uncle Tree's; so unwholesome! I shall paint it white and gold, and re-cover all the furniture, every stick; something bright and flowered. Look at that ottoman, with that ridiculous bead puppy on it! bead work is so antiquated! I shall do away with everything of that sort, you may depend upon it."

"You'll have everything real tasty, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Weight, fawningly. "Oh,

how thankful shall I be to have neighbors as *is* neighbors. Providence has raised you up, Maria, I do believe."

"There is the Moorish cabinet!" said Mrs. Pryor. She crossed the room and stood before the ancient cabinet, whose gold lacquer shone warm in the firelight. The dusk was deepening in the room, but the flames leaped and flickered, searching out every dim corner.

"I don't mind telling you, Malvina," said Mrs. Pryor, "that I have longed all my life to rummage that cabinet. It's my belief that it is simply crammed with valuable things, family relics, which belong as much to me as to any one, now Aunt Marcia is gone. The Darracott blood — where is the key?"

"I have the key!" said a voice behind her.

She turned with a violent start. There, in the dim firelight, amid the wavering gleams and shadows, stood — what, or who?

Gown of cinnamon-colored satin, ruffled

black silk apron, net kerchief pinned with a flashing diamond brooch, cap suggesting the Corinthian order — Mrs. Tree, or her spirit?

The tiny lace-mitted hands were crossed on the ebony crutch-stick, the black eyes gleamed fire, the lips curved in a malign smile.

"I have the key!" said the Vision again.

Mrs. Weight uttered a wild shriek and fled. Mrs. Pryor collapsed in a shuddering heap on the bead ottoman, her hands clasped over her eyes.

The old woman stood over her like an avenging sprite.

"Not yet, Maria Darracott!" she said. "Not yet!"

"That Tommy Candy!" sputtered Direxia Hawkes. "He ought to be in State Prison, that's where he ought to be. How you can sit there and stand up for him, Mis' Tree, is more than *I* can see."

"Pretty smart, to be able to sit and stand up at once, at my age, Direxia!" replied Mrs. Tree, composedly. "Tommy is a naughty boy, certainly, but I shall not prosecute him this time. You old goose, I told him to do it!"

"You — oh, my Solemn Deliverance! she's gone clean out of her wits *this* time, and there's an end of it. Oh! my gracious, Mis' Tree — if the Lord ain't good, and sent Doctor Stedman just this minute of time! Oh, Doctor Stedman, I'm glad you've come. She's settin' here in her cheer, ravin' distracted."

"How do you do, James?" said Mrs. Tree. "I am quite in my senses, thank you, and I mean to live to a hundred."

"My dear old friend," cried James Stedman, taking the tiny withered hands in his and kissing them, "I wish you might live for ever; but I can never thank you enough for having been dead for half an hour. It has made me the happiest man in the world. I am going

to tell Vesta this moment. It is never too late to be happy, is it, Mrs. Tree? Mayn't I say 'Aunt Tree' now?"

"It's all right, is it?" said Mrs. Tree. "I am glad to hear it. Vesta has not much sense, James, but then, I never thought you had too much, and she is as good as gold. I wish you both joy, and I shall come to the wedding. Now, Direxia Hawkes, what are you crying about, I should like to know? Doctor Stedman and Miss Vesta are going to be married, and high time, too. Is that anything to cry about?"

"She is the beat of all!" cried Direxia Hawkes, through her tears, which she was wiping recklessly with a valuable lace tidy.

"Fust she was dead and then she warn't, and then she was crazy and now she ain't, and I can't stand no more. I'm clean tuckered out!"

"Cat's foot!" said Mrs. Tree.

THE END.